

Five Essentials for Lasting Relationships

*What brings you life's greatest joys as well as sorrows?
Relationships!*

*What was the cause of the first "not good" in the Bible?
The absence of a relationship! (Genesis 2:18)*

*What is the root of our unease and dissatisfaction with life?
The absence of a relationship! (Matthew 11:28-29)*

*What is the essence of hell?
The eternal absence of a relationship! (Matthew 7:23)*

*What is the essence of eternal life as defined by Jesus?
An enduring relationship! (John 17:3)*

We were designed for relationships.

When relationships are healthy, even the most difficult events of life are endurable.

When relationships are unhealthy, even the best of circumstances are devoid of pleasure.

God is the author, initiator and sustainer of everlasting relationships. From His character we, too, can learn how to build lasting relationships.

Our initial plunge into self-destruction was the betrayal of a relationship; our relationship with God Himself. This relationship can only be restored by God's active intervention in our lives through His Son, His Spirit and His Word.

Broken relationships, whether vertical or horizontal, are never healed by accident. Building healthy relationships requires intentional effort based on godly character and sustained over time.

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A Bible Study Resource

by Ron Berrus
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Suggested Book Resources

Relationships: A Mess Worth Making	Lane, Tripp
Love and Respect	Emerson Eggerichs
Families Where Grace Is in Place	VanVonderen
Communication: Key to Your Marriage	H. N. Wright
Sacred Marriage	Gary Thomas
How to Manage Your Money	Larry Burkett
Instruments in the Hands of the Redeemer	Paul Tripp
Biblical Womanhood in the Home	Nancy Leigh DeMoss
Five Love Languages	Gary Chapman
The Peacemaker	Ken Sande
Humility	C.J. Mahaney

Suggested Website Resources

Randy Alcorn	www.epm.org/resources (Bible study resources)
Dennis Rainey	www.familylife.com (Marriage and family)
James Dobson	http://resources.family.org (Marriage and family)
Paul Tripp	www.paultrippministries.org/ (Marriage and family)
Ken Sande	www.peacemaker.net (Conflict resolution)
NANC	www.nanc.org (Christian counseling association)
CCEF	www.ccef.org (Christian counseling association)
CROWN	www.crown.org (Christian financial advice)
Ron Berrus	www.ronberrus.abwe.org

Marriage Issues Needing Constant Work

Three issues that will require your constant attention and adjustment as a married couple are *time, money and communication*.

Due to the busyness of life, it will not be easy to manage your time wisely. Learning to say “no” will be your greatest challenge!

TIME/SCHEDULES

Spiritual Life - plan time for personal and family worship, church attendance and building Christian friendships

Family- fun activities like game nights, vacations, walks, leisure, and planned *date nights* without the kids

Work - career expectations, overtime, holidays, education

Projects - house & yard, car maintenance, etc.

Financial demands will change as you move from setting up for a new born to schooling, dentists, sports, college and empty nest.

FINANCES

Family Budgeting - paying bills on time, savings & retirement goals

Tithing - investing at least 10% in the Lord's work

Mutual expectations for house upkeep & improvements, furnishings, vacations, personal wants & desires

The key to understanding and resolving your differing desires and expectations is communication. Consider communication as a gift you give to each other. It is a precious gift indeed!

COMMUNICATION

The gift of listening (learning to listen and ask questions without being defensive)

The gift of encouragement (learning to bless, encourage, and assist each other to grow in every area of life)

The gift of exploring sensitive areas and finding solutions together

Time schedules, family needs, finances

Relationships with in-laws and extended family expectations

Sexual fulfillment, temptation, and accountability

Think about it!

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The absence of a relationship! (Matthew 11:28-29)

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What is the essence of eternal life as defined by Jesus Himself?

An enduring relationship! (John 17:3)

When relationships are healthy, the worst of times are endurable.

If unhealthy, the best of circumstances are devoid of pleasure.

We were designed for relationships.

Our initial plunge into self-destruction was the betrayal of a relationship with God Himself. This relationship can only be restored by God's active intervention in our lives through His Son, His Spirit and His word. **Broken relationships, whether vertical or horizontal, are never healed by accident. Building healthy relationships requires intentional effort based on godly character and sustained over time.**

Godly = Godlike. Therefore, godly character reflects what God Himself is like. God declares His character through His commandments and demonstrates it in His relationships with His people.

God's commandments, particularly the *Decalogue, give us a succinct summary of His character. It is from these Ten Commandments that I have drawn the *five essentials for building lasting relationships* to follow.

*Decalogue means ten words and refers to the Ten Commandments revealed on Sinai in Exodus 20:1-17.

In over thirty years as a follower of Jesus Christ, husband, father, pastor and counselor, I have seen relationships on every part of the continuum: thriving, surviving, struggling, or self-destructing. I have worked with hundreds of people who have desperately desired to build lasting relationships. Many of them had the notion that I might possess some *secret, magic* answer with which *I could quickly fix their relationship problems*. It has been my growing conviction over the decades that they, and many others, were in error on at least three counts.

First, the solution is not secret. God has clearly revealed in His Word that there are necessary components in relationships that last. Human experience serves to confirm it.

Second, the solution is not magic. It takes understanding, effort and time to implement God's principles that can make our relationships survive and thrive.

Third, others could not solve their relationship problems. They could solve them, however, with God's input and their output. While a good, Biblical counselor can provide an accurate perspective and a healthy prescription, what the counselee does with that information and advice is up to them and the others they struggle to relate to.

This little booklet is not a substitute for personal, Biblical counseling. Wise people seek objective, godly counsel for life's conflicts and decisions. Seeking counsel is not an admission of failure. It is, rather, a demonstration of maturity.

This booklet is written in the hope that these simple, foundational, Biblical principles will be understood and personally applied in relationships. They are drawn from God's revelation of His character and will in "The Ten Commandments." These laws reveal God's holiness, our sinfulness, and our need of a Savior. *But they also reveal foundational character qualities that are to be lived out by the power of His Spirit in our human relationships.*

Romans 8:3-4 "For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did (through His Son) in order that the righteous

Financial Work Sheet

Gross \$ _____ + Tithe & Taxes _____ = Net Income _____

Net Income: _____

10% Permanent Savings for Retirement (IRA, 401k, Land, etc.)

20% Planned Short-term Savings (College, car, home, travel, etc.)

70% Living Expenses

House mortgage & taxes

Insurance

Upkeep (house, yard, etc.)

Electric (other heat source)

Sewer, Water, Trash, etc.

Automobile including insurance, gas & upkeep

Food

Clothing

Medical

Holidays, presents, etc.

Vacation

Education

Record Keeping: online banking, notebook

Separate Savings Accounts

Envelope Method: high control, easy

Checkbook, Debit Card, Limits, Plan

Credit Cards: how to use and not abuse

Financial Work Sheet

According to some, financial issues are at the root of more than 50% of all marriage conflicts and divorces in North America. The *American Dream* has turned out to be a nightmare as people pursue *the good life* with ever increasing possessions accumulated through an ever increasing debt-load.

There are excellent resources available for financial counsel and management listed on page 47. Our purpose is to lay down some practical guidelines for managing one's budget.

First, your "income" must exceed your "outgo." My advice is:

1. Make a budget using a method of allocation that you can control and stay current with. You have to plot and know your exact spending for a month before you can make an accurate budget.
2. Both spouses must come to terms with the budget and agree to live with it. If you need to adjust it, do so after mutual discussion. The purpose of a budget is to give you freedom to make decisions and to eventually get completely out of debt.
3. Acceptable debt includes house, car and school debt. Anything beyond this should ordinarily always be avoided.
4. Don't use a credit card if you ever have to pay interest on it. If you cannot pay off the card completely (and not by transferring balances!) before the due date each month, then stop using it until all your debt is eliminated.
5. Buying a good used car and keeping it at least three years after it's paid off is wise.
6. Make a shopping list and stick to it. Avoid impulse purchases of things you really don't need. The savings will add up.
7. Don't make purchases above \$100 until giving it at least three days to think it over.
8. If a potential purchase over \$1,000, give it at least a week or two and get some objective advice.
9. If a potential purchase is over \$5,000, take your time, do research, and get the advice of several wise individuals.
10. If you have to make a quick decision, it's better to wait and not buy. Quick financial decisions are almost always bad ones!

requirements of the law might be fully met in us who live according to the Spirit. (NIV excerpt)

With God's help and our diligent effort, these principles can be lived out as we pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14).

This booklet is available free in pdf at www.ronberrus.abwe.org. For additional resources on *The Five Essentials* including audio messages and teaching materials, go to the website and follow the links to:

Sermons Audio: Built to Last; Rules for Right Relationships
Marriage and Family: Five Essentials documents, PowerPoint's, etc.
Booklets: Five Essentials

While the five essentials apply to all relationships, the emphasis on marriage will be obvious. In the interest of making this booklet even more useful as a marriage counseling resource, I have added material on change, anger, personality versus character, family backgrounds and personal finances. These are important matters to discuss in premarital counseling. They are also the most prevalent issues in existing marriage conflicts. The last page includes a short list of recommended books and websites for additional help.

Five Essentials for Building Lasting Relationships

These *five essentials* are foundational for relationships that are healthy, strong and lasting.

Essential #1 Respect

Respect defines the existence of a relationship.
Respect is demonstrated by listening.

Exodus 20:2-7,12 (excerpts)

ōI am the LORD your God

You shall have no other gods before Me.

You shall not make for yourself a carved image.

You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.

Honor your father and your mother.ö

God listens!

Traditionally, we think of the first four of the Ten Commandments as written on the first tablet of stone. They define man's relationship with God ó *the vertical*. The last six commands comprise the second tablet of stone and refer to man's relationships with mankind ó *the horizontal*.

It is significant that the first commandment on both tablets refer to *the necessity of respect in our relationships*. With God and with our parents, (the first human relationship) respect is commanded.

“No other gods.” In order to have a lasting relationship with the one, true and living God, man must listen to what the one, true and living God has said about Himself. He revealed Himself to mankind as a holy, omnipotent Spirit; Creator of all things. To make other gods is to show ultimate disrespect to God Himself. This refusal to listen to the one, true God is the essence of sin. When we choose to listen to the deceptive words of the serpent, other men, or our own imaginations, we have ceased listening to God. This refusal to listen to God demonstrates our disrespect for Him.

Exploring Family Backgrounds

1. Describe your mom & dad; their personalities, hobbies, friendships, passions, etc.
2. Describe your parents' marriage relationship.
3. How did your parents express love, resolve conflicts, discipline the kids, relate to each other?
4. What are (were) their strengths and weaknesses?
5. What was your home atmosphere like?
6. How were emotions expressed and resolved?
7. What were the big values in your home (what mattered to your parents)?
8. Describe your family's economic situation and how money was handled.
9. Describe your family recreation or vacation times.
10. How were holidays and birthdays celebrated?
11. Discuss gift giving practices in your family.
12. Who did what chores in the home?
13. Describe extended family relationships.
14. How was the spiritual life modeled in your home?
15. What traditions are important to you from your upbringing?

Personality versus Character

In our earlier discussion about acceptance, mention was made about the difference between personality and character. Certain aspects of personality are God-given, hard wired, and genetically determined. They do not indicate godliness or carnality. They are amoral abilities, tendencies, and traits that people possess as part of their God-given make-up. While certain personality traits may irritate those with opposite traits, they will remain and must be accepted and lived with. Character, however, will determine how we respond to personality and is the essence of godliness or ungodliness. The following chart may be useful to you as you discuss and study the subject.

PERSONALITY

Extrovert, introvert

Artistic, mechanical

Social, loner

Leader, follower

Melancholy, exuberant

Quick, plodder

Talkative, Quiet

Energetic, laid back

Methodical, random

Organized, scattered

Detailed, big picture

Humorous, serious

Perfectionist, NOT!

CHARACTER

Honest, dishonest

Truthful, deceptive

Kind, cruel

Compassionate, stoic

Dependable, impulsive

Pure, lustful

Grateful, ungrateful

Flexible, demanding

Humble, arrogant

Generous, selfish

Forgiving, resentful

Diligent, lazy

Respectful, disrespectful

“**Honor your father and your mother.**” Similarly, we demonstrate disrespect to parents by refusing to listen to and obey them. The essence of honoring (showing respect for) parents is to listen to their words and to obey them. The foundation of a healthy parent/child relationship is the respect the child demonstrates towards the parent, by listening and quickly responding in loving obedience. Good parents give direction to their children with their children’s best interests at heart.

The single most often repeated command in the Bible is the command to listen. It was the core issue in the Garden of Eden. A quick reading of Genesis 1-3 reveals a choice that was made to stop listening to God’s voice. Israel’s relationship to God was rooted in a command to listen to Him.

Deuteronomy 6:3-5 **Therefore hear, O Israel,** and be careful to observe it, that it may be well with you, and that you may multiply greatly as the LORD God of your fathers has promised you; a land flowing with milk and honey. **Hear, O Israel:** The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

It was at the core of Solomon’s wisdom principles.

Proverbs 1:5 A wise man will hear and increase learning

Proverbs 1:8 My son, hear the instruction of your father

Proverbs 19:27 Stop listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray

The English word “listen” is translated from the Old Testament Hebrew word “shema.” Shema is variously translated as “to listen, hear, heed, and obey.” To the Hebrew mind, to listen and to obey were synonymous. If one didn’t obey, then it was evident they did not listen, for listening included within it the concept of appropriate response.

The ancient prophet Samuel (whose name is a word play on “shema”) rebuked King Saul for arrogance and rebellion. It was tied to his refusal to listen to God.

1 Samuel 15:22-23 But Samuel replied: “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in **obeying** (shema) the voice of the LORD? **To obey** (shema) is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry.”

Listening is truly a life and death matter. Jesus frequently ended his teaching parables with the imperative warningí Matthew 13:9 öHe who has ears to hear, let him hear!ö Jesus' final warning to each of the seven churches in Revelation was the sameí Revelation 2:29. öHe who has ears to hear, let him hear!ö

The central issue in relational conflict often includes a lack of respect revealed by a lack of willingness to actively listen to one another.

On the other hand, early in Genesis we learn that God listens!

Genesis 21:17 (God listened to the weeping voice of Hagar and rescued herí)

Psalms 116:1 öI love the LORD, because He has heard My voice...ö

Many times in the Law and the Prophets we see evidence that God listened to the voices of men when they were unaware of it.

Malachi 3:16 öThen those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the LORD and who meditate on His name.ö

Listening is an attribute of God Himself!

Obstacles to listening

There are a number of obstacles that commonly prevent our ability to listen well. Four of the most common and most preventable areí

1. Defensiveness

To embrace criticism or correction requires humility, and is therefore unnatural for us. The natural, sinful response is to interpret every revelation of our imperfections as an attack and immediately erect a wall of defense. Some examples include turning the other person off, rationalizing the fault, comparisons to the faults of others, and minimizing. Others turn the table, launching an attack by reminding the speaker of their faults. Others become archeologists, digging up ancient history in an attempt to nullify the information. Still others resort to blame shifting, (Adam in Eden) excusing the fault by pinning the cause on others. Each of these responses is evidence of sinful pride. On the other hand, those who acknowledge their faults and need of growth, humbly receiving criticism, have the ability to grow in grace and godliness.

Anger Check List

Answer the following with *always, sometimes, seldom, or never.*

1. I know when I am angry
2. It is normal for me to get angry
3. I usually discuss my anger with my spouse
4. I let my anger control my conduct (words, attitude)
5. I am satisfied with the way I process anger
6. My spouse is satisfied with the way I process anger
7. I am satisfied with the way we settle our differences
8. My spouse is satisfied with the way we settle them
9. It upsets me when my spouse disagrees with me
10. I feel sorry for myself frequently and feel mistreated
11. I sulk and pout when I feel mistreated
12. I freely express my ideas, even when they differ from my spouse or others

Anger Patterns

1. **Control** öI rarely if ever get angryö or öI rarely if ever feel anything very deeply either positive or negative.ö
2. **Collect** öI walk away, go silent, hold it in at all costs until I can't stand it and then I pour it all out at once.ö
3. **Stew** öI tend to think evil thoughts about others; I think about getting even; think about getting back at those who make me angry and mistreat me.ö
4. **Sever** öI cut off association with those who make me angry if I can; I avoid them; punish those who anger me by going silent on them and ignoring themö
5. **Lecture** öI complain and criticize; I blame others; I find fault with people and things; I can go on and on about things or people that bug me, offend me, hurt me, etc.ö
6. **Storm** öI erupt easily and mouth off; I can't seem to control it; lots of things make me angry; I'm angry a lot of the time, maybe even most of the time; I need to vent.ö
7. **Explode** öI lose it and yell and scream; throw things; bust things, hit walls; hit or slap people occasionally.ö

Key Scriptures Regarding Anger

Ephesians 4:29-32 & Colossians 3:8
Ephesians 6:4 & Colossians 3:21
Proverbs 12:16
Proverbs 14:29
Proverbs 15:1
Proverbs 15:18
Proverbs 16:32
Proverbs 19:11
Proverbs 19:19
Proverbs 22:24-25
Ecclesiastes 7:9
Mark 3:5
Ephesians 4:26
Ephesians 4:29-32

Biblical Case Studies on Anger

Jonah 1:3, 12, 4:1-11

Moses Exodus 32:19-35; Leviticus 10:16-20
Numbers 11:10-30, 12:1-16, 14:1-21, 20:1-29

Job Job 6; 12:1-4, 13:1-5, 19:1-6, 42:7-10

Cain Genesis 4:1-24

Paul and Barnabas Acts 15:36-39

Questions as you study these people and their anger struggles.

1. Why did they become angry?
2. Was it righteous or unrighteous anger?
3. How did they respond?
4. What could have been other godly options?

2. Assuming

Long acquaintance and familiarity can indeed breed contempt in the hearts of sinful people. Because we know another so well, there comes a tendency to quickly assume we know where a conversation is going and what is behind it. Real listening stops when we cease concentrating on the individual and the information they are sharing and begin focusing on preparing our reply. The longer the relationship, the more prevalent is the tendency to draw premature conclusions or read into statements. We must train ourselves to avoid this form of disrespect.

3. Bad Attitudes

Bitterness is a poisoned spirit from past unresolved conflicts. When our first response to information is a negative interpretation, bitterness is present. A bitter person will never respect and therefore never listen to the person who is the object of that bitterness.

Resentment is a refusal to forgive old hurts. This is a settled negativity akin to bitterness that is longer in duration and deeper in antagonism. Again, this attitude robs the listener of a willingness or openness to listen.

Anger is the emotional reaction to believing that our rights, or the rights of those we care about, have been violated. It is a settled antagonism that lashes out, often rehearsing old hurts and using others as an excuse for one's own inner disquiet and frustration.

Malice is a desire to get even; as with the above sins, it blocks our willingness or ability to respect others and therefore to listen to them.

4. Stress

Active listening is work! When our minds are occupied with worries or fears, mental fatigue robs us of the ability to concentrate. In like manner, physical fatigue drains us of mental clarity and the ability to concentrate. If a person is spiritually dry, emotionally wired, worn out or confused, they will not be an active listener. This is not an excuse, but a reality. There are good times and not so good times to enter into deep discussions that require concentration and controlled responses. Serious conversations usually require substantial time. Failure to take this into consideration can cause additional frustration and failure.

Active listening is neither natural nor easy. It is, however, a skill that can be learned. It requires concentration, a willingness to consider another point of view, and entertaining the possibility of personal change. Our tendency to half-listen or simply assume we know what is about to be said causes us to turn off our listening altogether. More often than we like to admit, we pretend to listen while our minds wander or we quickly insert our own thoughts without seeking to hear what is really being said.

Active listening is a skill that can be learned and developed. It includes the following elements.

Concentration: sincere listening with the purpose of correctly interpreting what is being said. Someone has well said: "I never learned a thing while talking!" Learners listen. Leaders listen. Influencers listen. Good counselors listen. Proverbs 18:13 "He who answers before listening.. that is his folly and his shame."

Reflection: putting into your own words the main point(s) to summarize what you think was said. This can be done by saying something like "If I understand you correctly, you're saying that" Proverbs 27:17,19 "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. As water reflects a face, so a man's heart reflects the man."

Exploration: asking questions that provide further insight into key points or issues. Some options are "Can you tell me why you feel that way?" "What causes you to think that?" "Perhaps I would better understand if you gave me more history." "Are you saying this because?" "Are there other factors that contributed to this?" "How did you respond to that?" Proverbs 18:17 "The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and asks him questions..." Ask for explanations in a way that does not cast doubt on the other person's integrity, but rather attempts to clarify what is being said.

How would God have me to respond to this anger? Here are some action options we have with our anger.

1. **Ask for forgiveness** from God for unrighteous, self centered anger.
2. **Cover with love.** 1Peter 4:8 "And above all things have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins." Love covers a multitude of sins. Some slights are uncharacteristic shortcomings that should be forgiven outright. Ephesians 4:2 "With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love;" Colossians 3:13 "Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man has a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so you do also." The Biblical command to "forbear one another" simply means to "put up with one another." Forbear the inconsequential. We do not need to confront others with every failure and shortcoming they display. This can quickly become a pharisaical, critical spirit causing others to avoid you. This is not to say that we are required to become doormats. This leads us to the third option...
3. **Confront in love.** Character faults should always be confronted. Confrontation needs to be done with gentleness and a willingness to see things from the other point of view. Raise the issue, ask questions, explain your perspective, be humble, and ask for forgiveness if you've been wrong. If genuine wrong has taken place, then it normally requires the offended party to confront the offender personally and privately. If a possible wrong has taken place and it is a serious matter, then confrontation is usually the best choice. While confrontation runs the risk of even further trouble, leaving serious sin unconforted is neither loving nor helpful to anyone involved. Matthew 18:15-35 gives clear principles to follow. If the matter is serious, it may be best to get wise, objective counsel before attempting the confrontation. Confidentiality must be maintained in the process as you seek how to go about it.

Admit... Analyze... Action

with them for the sake of a shallow peace. It is a serious problem and must be addressed honestly if growth and healing are ever to occur.

4) Face

Having examined three common wrong responses to anger, we now come to the healthy and correct response. *Face the fact of your anger* and take the three steps necessary to deal with it God's way.

Three Steps to Resolving Anger

Admit – Tag it

As soon as you sense rising irritation, admit to yourself that you are starting to become angry. This is the first step in overcoming it. It is not necessary that you say anything to others at this point. But you must catch it early and control it before it grows to the point that it controls you. Depending on various factors, the speed with which this happens can be frightening. Start by silently admitting to yourself that you are becoming angry at the outset.

Analyze – Hold it

As soon as you recognize the beginnings of anger in your own heart, ask yourself a question to determine if your anger is righteous or unrighteous. Such questions as:

• Why am I getting angry? Do I have a *Biblical right* to be angry? Do I know all the *facts* or just what I *am feeling*? Did they do or say something to *intentionally* hurt me? What *right* do I feel is being violated? Is this a *legitimate right* or a *selfish desire*? Do I have all the *facts* or am I *assuming* things? Am I *reading into* what is being said or done? Am I *judging motives* or hearts that God forbids me to judge? Am I, *myself*, often guilty of the *same thing*?

Is the cause hurt, fear, frustration, or mistreatment? Don't react until you take time to think about it!

Action – Choose it

You have a choice about what actions to take! Anger has the insidious tendency to blind us to our choices. Anger would make us slaves of spontaneous reaction instead of thoughtful response.

Conclusion: seek to understand what the other person is really asking for. It is naïve to think that every conflict can be resolved in a single conversation, but assisting the person to come to a conclusion, albeit a temporary one, is an appropriate goal. The following questions may be helpful.

• What could I do that would help you most at this time?

• What do you think it would take to fully resolve the situation?

• What one thing could you do as a first step towards resolving it?

• How have you tried to resolve the situation in the past?

• What options do you have? (This question is vitally important, as people often forget that they do have options.)

Regardless of the cause of the conflict, it is important that the teachable party (or parties) focus on demonstrating personal respect towards the other person while taking steps to obey Biblical commands and wisdom principles consistent with God's Word.

Questions to ask to become a better listener:

• I know someone is really listening to me when they

• Someone I really respect is

• It's difficult for me to show respect towards someone when

• Some of the best advice I ever received was

• Two of the most important things to me are

• One of my greatest concerns right now is

• One of my greatest regrets is that

• One of my greatest hopes or dreams would be that

Self Check Questions on Respect:

1. Would most people say I am a really good listener?
2. Who do I have a hard time listening to? Why is that?
3. What are my greatest hindrances to listening?
4. What clearly communicates respect to me?
5. When has a lack of listening caused a conflict for me?

Respect	Honesty	Commitment	Acceptance	Forgiveness
<i>I Listen</i>	<i>I Speak</i>	<i>I Serve</i>	<i>I Embrace</i>	<i>I Pray</i>

Essential #2 Honesty

Honesty defines the depth of a relationship.

Honesty is demonstrated by speaking truth in a loving way.

Exodus 20:16

öYou shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.ö

God speaks!

Ephesians 4:25, 29, 31, 5:15 (excerpts)

öTherefore, putting away lying, let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.

Speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Himí (that is)Christ.ö

Relationships are constructed through honest communication.

No communication = no growth in a relationship.

Unhealthy communication = an unhealthy relationship.

Good communication + good character + skills = a good relationship.

Communication is a process. Half of that process is listening; the other half is speaking. God requires both.

God speaks! The very first thing we learn about the true and living God from the Bible is that He is a God who speaks. He speaks with omnipotent power as well as absolute honesty. What He says, will happen. What He promises, He will do. What He speaks, we can count on; No ifs, ands, or buts!

Words that describe God's kind of communication are veracity, truthfulness, and honesty. The opposite of *relationship-building-communication* is *relationship-destroying-speech* characterized by deception, misleading and dishonesty. This includes speaking direct lies but also allowing others to believe lies by remaining silent in the face of assumed falsehoods.

used makes all the difference. Righteous anger may motivate us to get involved to rescue the defenseless or show mercy to the needy. It may also motivate us to hurt the innocent and exercise abusive control over the vulnerable. Anger can quickly turn to bitterness and resentment if not dealt with in a godly way. Bitterness, resentment, and malice are always sin and result from being dominated by unresolved anger.

Four Common Responses to Anger

1) Flee

Because of bad past experiences, many people respond to any potentiality of anger by running away. If a person has been the recipient of abusive anger or has been frightened by it, they often refuse to admit the experience and choose to pretend it isn't happening or go to extremes to mollify and satisfy others. While this may provide temporary relief, it does nothing to prevent, resolve or rectify unhealthy anger patterns.

2) Fight

Flight or fight are the two most common reactions to anger. While some learn to run away from anger, others have learned to fight back. This sinful manipulation through aggressive response is designed to control others. The practitioner is often blind to his own sin, choosing to believe he is öjust being honestö or ötelling it like it is.ö But such aggressive behavior, whether verbal or physical, is ungodly and therefore destructive to relationships.

3) Forget

It is not unusual for a person who has a low flash point and becomes quickly angry to just as quickly return to calmness and an attempt at humor to diffuse the tension. Because it happens so quickly, they forget about it and minimize the seriousness of it. They prefer to bury the memories and move on without ever asking for forgiveness or seeking to overcome their sinful reactions. Evasion doesn't resolve and the stress will eventually reach a breaking point in most relationships. It drives an ever deepening wedge in relationships. An angry person pressures others to be silent, dishonest, and insincere

Anger

Anger is an emotion.

It is *the emotional reaction to perceived violated rights*. I say "perceived" because it is not uncommon for us to become angry over misinterpreted events, words, facial expressions, or body language. Righteous anger is a God-like quality motivated by love and justice for the oppressed. It is controlled, purposeful, and expressed without spite or disrespect. Unrighteous anger is sinful and motivated by such things as selfishness, pride, impatience, unrealistic and unfair expectations, and a failure to get our own way.

Anger is universal.

Almost everyone experiences anger regularly somewhere on the spectrum between fleeting irritation and uncontrolled rage. Some have learned how to control anger and other negative emotions in a healthy and God honoring manner. Others have developed very ungodly and therefore unhealthy patterns regarding anger and it controls them.

Anger is not necessarily sin, but is dangerous and often leads to sin.

Ephesians 4:26-32 (excerpts)

Be *angry*, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your *wrath*, nor give place to the devil. Let no *corrupt word* proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all *bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking* be put away from you, with all *malice*. And be kind to one another, *tenderhearted, forgiving* one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.

James 1:19-20 My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and *slow to become angry*, for *man's anger* does not bring about the *righteous life* that God desires. (NIV)

Anger, for moral beings, is inevitable in a fallen world filled with injustice. And while anger is not necessarily sin in itself, yet we are often warned about its potential lethal character. Anger is very dangerous and easily leads to sin. Just as uranium can produce energy in a power plant that benefits millions, so it can also be used in a bomb that destroys those same millions. How it is handled and

Ephesians 5:15, in further application of The Ninth Commandment, adds the additional qualifier "in love" to "speaking the truth." This phrase may mean "speak in a loving manner" or "speak words motivated by love." Both are affirmed in other places in the Bible.

Our motivation in speaking truth should include a desire to demonstrate love and concern for the person spoken to. That is, a desire to bless and ultimately help the other. This is important to remember when tension increases and one is tempted to spout off *facts* intended to wound or put people in their place. This is not the way of Christ.

Not only our motivation, but also our manner of speaking should demonstrate love. Our words should evidence patience, concern and gentleness. *How we speak* greatly impacts *what others hear!*

2 Timothy 2:24-25 And the Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition (NASB)

My relationship with you will go just as deep *as my honesty and your willingness to listen* will allow it to go. As soon as I cease to be honest, I have drawn the line on the depth chart of my relationships. Now, for me to be honest and transparent with you, I must trust your integrity and wisdom to receive the information I am trusting you with.

Most of us learn, as children, that being honest may result in being hurt. We tell someone a secret, and they then make it broadly known to our embarrassment, shame, or pain. We learn that in a fallen world, being honest may be more painful than being silent. Thus we take our first steps back, retreating from either transparency, honesty or both. We become self protective and manipulative, protecting ourselves from prospective pain and manipulating others with our words to get what we want or avoid what we don't.

It all began in the Garden of Eden (hiding, silence, blame-shifting, lying) and has continued unabated to this very day. The fact that the results of such communication patterns are painful and destructive

beyond measure has done nothing to alleviate the problem. God alone can set us free by His forgiveness and grace to live and speak truth in love.

A brief survey of Ephesians 4:24-32 provides a helpful summary of *Biblical Communication Guidelines*.

1. **Be Honest:** Ephesians 4:25 Don't deceive either with words or silence. Regardless of our motivation, deception is wrong.
2. **Keep Current:** Ephesians 4:26 Don't sweep hurts under the rug, hoping they will go away. Don't store up offenses. Resolution of conflict requires honest, humble interaction.
3. **Attack the Problem, not the Person:** Ephesians 4:29-31 Accusatory attacks beginning with "You always" or "You never" only increase conflict. Remember, the goal is resolving the conflict and implementing positive change, not assigning blame. Conflict causes tension and the tendency of the "fight or flight" reaction. Running from the conflict or attacking others are ungodly responses. In this regard, it is imperative to keep our hearts and attitudes right. Good discussion requires careful definition. Seek to define the conflict clearly by asking good questions. State your own preferred solutions and the reasons for them and then listen to the other person's perspective and desires. Survey the options for now and for the future and then choose a solution you can both live with for now, as you work towards better options for the future.
4. **Respond, Don't React:** Ephesians 4:32 Thoughtful response requires careful listening and well chosen words. Impulsive reactions are often sinful and therefore destructive. The Holy Spirit delights in controlling our tongues by controlling our hearts and minds through scripture. Matthew 12:34 "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." As you evaluate your response to conflict, discover the patterns of your sinful behaviors, thoughts and words. Seek to understand the false beliefs and attitudes that produce these unhealthy patterns. Go to the scripture to discover the Biblical truths that must replace your false, sinful thoughts, and perspectives. Then write out a possible plan to implement a new and better way to respond to future conflicts.

Change Your Beliefs

Core beliefs determine behavior. Seeing the direct cause and effect relationship between real beliefs and behavior is important. We always act consistently with what we believe at any given moment. This does not mean we always act consistently with what we say we believe, however! That is why filling our minds with truth that is truly believed will eventually result in behavior that is holy.

The first step in lasting change is to replace the lies we believe with the truth of God. John 8:32 "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." Therefore, begin by identifying the false beliefs that are contributing to your sinful habit patterns.

What are the false beliefs (the little *tapes* you play over and over in your head) that define your perspectives about life, work, family, money, conflict, etc.? Such thoughts as: "I am stupid." "Life stinks." "I will never make it." "God doesn't care about me." "What's the use?" "I am out of here." "I can't take it anymore." "They always get their way. I am always on the short end of the stick."

We all are tempted by evil thoughts. But lest they take root as habitual perspectives we must labor to replace these beliefs with God's truth. Go to the Word of God and begin searching for core truths that correct your beliefs. Such things as: "God will complete His work in me." Philippians 1:16 "God is in control and has allowed this for my ultimate good." Romans 8:28-31 "God will give me sufficient grace to endure this." 2 Corinthians 3:4-6, 12:9 "God is faithful and I can trust Him." 1 Thessalonians 5:24.

Change Your Attitudes

What are the negative, sinful, prevalent attitudes that define my reactions to life, work, family, money, conflict, etc.? Is your attitude self centered, stubborn, self indulgent, self pitying. Again, go to the Word and fill your mind with truth to combat these sins.

Change Your Actions

What are the sinful actions that result from wrong beliefs and attitudes? Confess them and trace their source back to those wrong beliefs and seek God's Spirit and Word for correction.

The Process of Change

We all love to talk about it and we all resist implementing it! But for the follower of Christ, change is essential. We are called to become like Christ in outlook, attitude, motives, words, and actions.

Change is both exciting to contemplate and difficult to inculcate. Habits are hard to break. Regardless of whether a habit is mental or behavioral, it is ingrained by constant repetition. It will take conscious effort to begin a "new normal" and it will not become habitual without setbacks along the way. Don't let failures define you. Let them remind you of the necessity of persevering in the process and depending on God for the power to succeed.

The Bible is filled with commands and stories that illustrate common sinful behaviors that *must be changed* in our lives. Here's a quick list starting in Genesis. Do any describe ways you need to change?

Bitter, disrespectful, complaining, ungrateful, fearful, envious, discontent, proud, self pitying, unforgiving, undisciplined, stingy, greedy, deceitful, controlling, manipulative, demanding, impulsive, lazy, blame shifting, rationalizing, defensive, critical, selfish, unloving, unkind, sarcastic, demeaning, gossiping

God calls us to a life of change. The Biblical term is sanctification. It means "the process of changing to become more like Christ."

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it."

This process takes place through the truths of scripture.
John 17:17 "Sanctify them through Your truth. Your word is truth."

While the steps are simple to define, the process will take everything you've got and more.

Communication Guidelines

DO

Be specific when addressing issues or making requests.

Be positive and explain what you desire, instead of merely hinting.

Suggest solutions and be willing to negotiate; not just complaining.

Listen with attention and respect.

Ask questions to understand; not as a prosecuting attorney.

Take responsibility for your own feelings. "When (this) happens, I feel like _____ because _____"

DON'T

Exaggerate with "You always" or "You never" statements.

Become a Lecturer with complaints, demands, or demeaning words.

Become a Historian, trying to find exceptions to the obvious or dredging up the past to make a point.

Become an Accountant, constantly correcting every minor detail of someone else's story. If it doesn't matter, leave it alone.

Interrupt or finish sentences for others. This is rude.

Let the sun go down on your conflict. Make every reasonable effort to settle differences as soon as possible.

Delve into serious conflict when either person is tired. It will limit your ability to listen, maintain self control, and be objective. Postponing a discussion is not avoiding the issue. It is seeking a timely opportunity that will increase the likelihood of a successful conclusion.

Personal Evaluation Questions

1. Is dishonesty a problem in my life experience? When? Why?
2. Do my words matter? Matthew 12:33-37
3. What do my words reveal? Luke 6:40-45

Five Questions to ask before you speak

Ephesians 4:24-32; Colossians 4:6

1. Is it TRUE (or deceptive, insincere, misleading) 1 Peter 3:10
2. Is it KIND (or critical, gossip) James 4:11; Proverbs 31:26
3. Is it LOVING (or cruel, sarcastic, demeaning) Ephesians 4:15
4. Is it NECESSARY (or thoughtless, useless) Matthew 12:36
5. Will it BUILD (personal, helpful) Colossians 4:6; Ephesians 4:29

In this, as in every aspect of life, balance is important. Not everyone needs to know or has a right to know everything about us. This is neither a call for revealing everything we think or feel nor is it a clarion call for silence to avoid a possible misuse of the tongue. (Some need to speak much more than they do while others need to ramp up their listening skills!) A study of Proverbs, along with the other passages cited, will provide insights necessary to sort out what should be said and to whom.

The ultimate goal in both actively listening and honestly speaking is to glorify God by building relationships that reflect His character and thereby bless and encourage others to follow Him.

Respect	Honesty	Commitment	Acceptance	Forgiveness
<i>I Listen</i>	<i>I Speak</i>	<i>I Serve</i>	<i>I Embrace</i>	<i>I Pray</i>

Exodus 20:14 Matthew 19:6

God keeps His covenants and promises to His people. God makes provision for restoring His rebellious, disobedient people. God keeps calling, working, and waiting. God doesn't give up. Even in judgment He shows mercy and a commitment to His word and His people. He doesn't prevent His people from making their own choices. He doesn't shield them from every wrong choice or the consequences of those choices. He always makes a way for restoring His people. God keeps His promises even when His people don't keep theirs.

Acceptance

Enjoyment

Embracing

Romans 15:7 "Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God."

I accept you are you are, without condoning sin or expecting perfection.

Exodus 20:17 Romans 15:7 Ephesians 1:6

God is who He says He is. I am called to embrace God as He really is. God accepts me as I am, with no intention of letting me stay that way! He is at work to make me like His Son. God has intentionally made us different. He has made us in different colors, sexes, ages, personalities, abilities, preferences, interests, and gifts. I am required to accept people as they are and to patiently labor to love them and help them become more like God's Son. There are some people I may naturally connect with due to personality, background, history or other factors, but I must not avoid others due to their uniqueness from me. Mature people differentiate between personality and character, between preferences and absolutes, and between forms and functions.

Forgiveness

Growth

Praying

Ephesians 4:32 "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you."

Because I am freely and fully forgiven, I freely and fully forgive you.

Exodus 20:13 Matthew 5:23-24; 44 Matthew 6:12-15 Ephesians 4:32

God is gracious and forgiving. God's forgiveness costs more than mine. Christ's willingness to forgive me of my sins cost him the agony of divine wrath on the cross. Forgiving others is possible and required because I, myself, am fully forgiven. Forgiveness is not optional. Forgiveness with reconciliation is two sided and therefore not always possible. Forgiveness with resolution is one sided and is therefore always possible and necessary. Forgiveness is a decision lived out in practice, not a feeling or loss of memory.

Five Essentials Quick Review

Essential **Defines** **Demonstrated by**
Respect **Existence** **Listening**
1Peter 2:17 Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.
I will listen to understand. I will seek truth with grace.
Exodus 20:3, 20:12 Matthew 5:47 1 Peter 3:15 Ephesians 4:1-2
God is who He says He is. I demonstrate respect towards God by listening to and responding to Him in obedience. God speaks clearly and does not hide His thoughts, desires, or plans from His people. I am to treat everyone with respect by listening to and responding to them appropriately. Trust must be earned but respect is to be given freely. (1 Peter 2:17, 3:7) Respect for people does not require agreement or cooperation. Respect does require a self-controlled, gracious, patient, thoughtful response to all men. God allows us to make choices and then allows us to live with the consequences. God offers help and grace, but does not prevent us from making choices. I am not responsible for others' choices but I am fully responsible for my own. I am not responsible for what others think, say, do, or do not do, unless by complicity or deception.

Honesty **Depth** **Speaking**
Ephesians 4:15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head Christ
I will speak truth in love.
Exodus 20:16 Matthew 5:37 Ephesians 4:25
God is truth. He does not deceive. He tells us all we need to know. He communicates. He keeps His promises and His warnings. God requires that we speak truth, telling people what they need to know. We are to communicate our desires and plans while letting others make their own choices and live with the consequences. I am fully responsible for my own words, choices and actions. I am responsible to be honest and consistent in responding to the choices of others. I must not lie, gossip, be critical in spirit, a flirt, a flatterer or a hypocrite.

Commitment **Length** **Serving**
Micah 6:8 He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you; But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?
I accept my role as a servant of Christ, and place all my relationships under His Lordship.

Essential #3 Commitment

Commitment *defines the length* of a relationship.
Commitment is demonstrated by serving.

Exodus 20:14
öYou shall not commit adultery.ö

God keeps!

In review: Respect defines the existence of a relationship and is demonstrated by listening. Honesty defines the depth of a relationship and is demonstrated by speaking truth in a loving manner.

God speaks truth. God listens carefully. God keeps His covenants. It is on these foundations that our everlasting relationship with God stands. These same foundations are essential in building lasting, healthy human relationships as well.

God is committed to His people and the covenants He makes with them. This enduring commitment is manifested by His refusal to disown us, even at the cost of His only Son.
Hebrews 6:13-20 When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, öI will surely bless you and give you many descendants.ö And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.

God's commitment to us necessitated the deepest level of servanthood and sacrifice imaginable. John 3:16 speaks to commitment, this foundational aspect of relationship. öGod so loved I He gave I His only Son.ö

Three Kinds of Human Commitment in Marriage

1. *Commitment to My Own Happiness (A Deal)*

We are all committed to our own happiness. However, the pursuit of our own happiness is doomed to failure when rooted in selfishness. This perspective sees people as objects; a means to obtain happiness. It seems like a good deal! I give so much and I get so much in return. Most people enter marriage more committed to their own happiness than to the other person or the relationship itself. Thus, when struggles come (and they do come), the good deal doesn't seem so good anymore and before you know it the deal is off!

2. *Commitment to the Institution of Marriage (A Contract)*

Today, states like Delaware have a divorce rate approaching 70%. America as a whole has a divorce rate of 50% for first marriages, 67% for second marriages and 74% for third marriages. A hundred and fifty years ago the divorce rate in North America was an estimated 5%. What happened?

There are, no doubt a myriad of reasons (sociological, legal, educational, and financial) that have contributed to the rise. Let me hasten to add the obvious: a century ago not every marriage that broke up obtained a divorce and not every marriage that stayed together was a good one. However, a much higher commitment to the institution of marriage (the contract) existed and this provided time and opportunity for people to stay together long enough to learn how to live together. Like the person who said: "I've been married for 50 years and never once contemplated divorce. Murder a few times, but never divorce. I don't believe in it!" (Overlooking the dark humor, this does underscore a commitment to marriage as an institution.) People were considered dishonest for breaking a contract and this sense of honor often preserved it. But the Bible says marriage is more than a contract.

3. *Commitment to the Other Person (A Covenant)*

This kind of commitment is not a good deal or a contract, but a self-giving covenant. This third level of commitment is the kind of commitment that most reflects our Lord Jesus Christ. He was so

Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would he thank the servant because *he did what he was told to do*? So you also, *when you have done everything you were told to do*, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'

Forgiveness needs to be modeled to the next generation.

How we respond to conflict and offense is initially learned in our home of origin. If offenses are ignored, we learn to ignore rather than address them. If conflicts are never resolved as children, we are likely to leave them unresolved in adulthood. If conflict usually resulted in escalated arguments or worse, we will tend to avoid conflicts or become aggressive in return. Personality, example and habit combine to reinforce our behaviors and responses in the light of our upbringing. It is the rarest of families that model godly conflict resolution and responsible forgiveness. But there is, perhaps, no more valuable inheritance that can be left to children than a Biblical model of how to build relationships God's way by the constant application of respect, honesty, commitment, acceptance and forgiveness.

Forgiveness Self Check

1. Ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind anyone you need to forgive that you haven't.
2. Tell God that you forgive them and release them to His mercy and sovereign dealings.
3. Read Matthew 6:9-15 out loud and then ask God to forgive you to the same extent you have forgiven others.
4. If you are unwilling to do this, go to a mature believer and share your struggle, asking for their counsel. Ask them to pray with you right now for obedience in this matter. Do not let it rest until you have forgiven and released it all to God.
5. If you are tempted to question your forgiveness, then take it back to God in prayer when those thoughts or questions arise.

Respect	Honesty	Commitment	Acceptance	Forgiveness
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gets away with evil. In the Old Testament (Leviticus 6:1-7), God includes restitution and legal recourse as part of the fabric of a just society. Personal forgiveness does not necessitate the removal of social justice or the consequences of sinful choices. God forgives us of all sin, but does not automatically remove the consequences of our sinful choices. They are separate and distinct matters and should be treated as such. We are to be free of all vengeance and malice while not ignoring the application of justice.

Forgiveness is possible by the grace of God.

Only the grace of God can transform human hearts to show God-like mercy and forgiveness. What is impossible for us in ourselves is not beyond the power of His indwelling Spirit. We need to ask for the grace to forgive even as we ask for His mercy on the one we have forgiven. This *mountain of impossibility* of forgiving others was the very subject of the following parable of Jesus.

Mark 11:23-25 ðI tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.ö

Forgiveness is required by the grace of God.

Because we have been forgiven, we must forgive. Our tendency is to ask mercy for ourselves but to demand justice of others. Grace requires that I see myself and others in the same way. The grace which saves us must be seen in the way we treat others. Grace received must become grace extended. It was this command for constant forgiveness that prompted the *öincrease our faithö* cry of the disciples in the following teaching of Jesus.

Luke 17:1-10 Jesus said to his disciples: ðThings that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves. *If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him.*ö

The apostles said to the Lord, *öIncrease our faith!*ö He replied, ðIf you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.ö

committed to His Father and so committed to us, that He laid down His life to preserve and restore us. (Mark 10:45; Luke 19:10; Philippians 2:5-8) The first two kinds of commitment do not require servanthood. This kind necessitates it. True commitment, in the Christ-like sense of the quality, manifests itself in a motivation that desires and pursues what is best for the other person even at deep, personal cost. This precipitates action that may or may not be preferred by the other person, but is always for their ultimate good as defined by God Himself. The motive is love, the purpose is good, and the action is appropriate.

Commitment as a manifestation of divine love expresses itself in such things as patience, endurance, hope, longsuffering and service. It serves with pure motives and gives generously regardless of reciprocation. Only Christ can so transform a human heart to empower such selfless, enduring servanthood. And because it is Christ who transforms the heart, this servant-hearted commitment becomes a delight to the giver and a delight to Christ, the ultimate object of our service.

Commitment alone can remain an unchanging anchor in a relationship where feelings and circumstances have long since changed. Those who discard relationships when they no longer provide the return that was anticipated demonstrate what kind of commitment they had in the first place. A majority of divorces among professing Christians are no different than among unbelievers. Both commonly say: ðWe just weren't happy together.ö Or ðIt just didn't work out.ö

At this point, let me say that I am not suggesting that one is bound to remain in an abusive, psychotic, or abandoned relationship. Paul makes that clear in 1 Corinthians 7. Our hearts break at the untold cost of human suffering precipitated upon unwilling victims of such abuse. It is not the intention of the author to inflict pain on the reader and if such has been the case, a sincere apology is hereby extended. If this were a booklet on healing the scars of past abuse and abandonment, the tenor and content would be much different. However, our present purpose is to encourage and exhort those

willing and able to improve viable relationships and to build new relationships on a solid foundation.

Questions to Evaluate and Strengthen my Commitment

1. How can I demonstrate my commitment in this relationship by serving in a way that would be useful and appreciated by others?
2. What aspects of serving do I delight in? (This is often in an area of giftedness designed by God.)
3. What aspects of being a committed servant are most difficult for me in this relationship?
4. Do I tend to be manipulated by others because I won't say "no" to any requests? (This is unhealthy.)
5. Do I struggle with the "fear of man" to the extent that I never want to disappoint anyone? (This is guilt.)
6. Are my commitments balanced? (Do I tend to over value one relationship and undervalue others? Do I need to adjust?)
7. Do I make time for God? (To listen, pray, serve)
8. Do I make time to rest and renew myself so I am able to serve God and others for the long haul? (Sabbath principle)

Biblical "One Another" Commands

Romans 12:10 Be kindly affectionate in honor giving preference to one another.

Romans 15:5 Be like-minded toward one another.

Romans 15:7 Accept one another.

Romans 15:14 Admonish one another.

1Corinthians 12:25 Have the same care for one another.

Galatians 5:13 Serve one another.

Ephesians 4:32 And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another.

Ephesians 5:19 Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

Ephesians 5:21 Submitting to one another.

1Thessalonians 4:18 Comfort one another.

Hebrews 3:13 But exhort one another daily.

James 5:16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another.

1Peter 1:22 Love one another fervently with a pure heart.

1John 4:7 Beloved, let us love one another.

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mistaken view of offense and forgiveness. Sin is not OK! Sin put Jesus on the cross! I don't have to play "let's pretend" about the pain of the sin or the consequences that follow it. Pretending that sin against me or those I love really doesn't matter, is a futile effort at minimizing the pain and a form of self deception. Sin is real. Pain is real. Sorrow is real. And praise God - so is forgiveness.

Forgiveness does not necessitate the other person's appropriate response.

I believe there is an important distinction between *resolution* and *reconciliation*. Let me explain. If I forgive another person, but they either reject me or reject the idea that they've even done anything wrong to me, then I am left with *resolution but not reconciliation*. I have resolved the matter in my heart with them and with God, having forgiven them and asking God to show them mercy. I will treat them with kindness and mercy, leaving the outcome to God. But for *reconciliation* to take place, both parties need to see things the same way. We are reconciled with God because we come to see ourselves, our sin and His provision the way God does. *Without this agreement, reconciliation is impossible*. If the offender and the offended parties both see the issue alike, an apology and the offer of forgiveness reconcile the relationship. Either way, we must forgive, though we are not responsible for, or in control of, what the other person does with that forgiveness.

Forgiveness does not require the establishment of a close relationship with the offender.

If the offense is an indication of a serious character flaw, then to re-enter a trust relationship with the person may be very unwise. Thievery, sexual abuse, or violence must be forgiven, but to place oneself at the disposal of a thief or an abuser would be foolish. Forgiveness of and protection from abuse are mutually appropriate.

Forgiveness does not require the removal of all consequences of sin.

A legal charge against a person who is guilty of abuse, thievery, or other illegalities is distinct from the extension of personal forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean the forgiven person

#5 Forgiveness is sealed by merciful intercession. The decision to forgive was demonstrated by Job's intercession for his friends. Instead of walking away, instead of asking God for justice, Job interceded for their forgiveness. Only God could so work in a man's heart to make him so like Himself in this regard. I take great comfort in knowing I have forgiven others when I ask God to bless them, forgive them, lead them, and show them mercy today. I do not need to feel "all warm and fuzzy" about them. But I do need to release them into God's hands and seek God's mercy for them, for I, too, am a recipient of infinite mercy!

Allow me to describe my understanding of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not a feeling, it is a decision.

Have you ever thought: "I must not have forgiven since I am still hurt?" The genuineness of forgiveness is not determined by the presence of good feelings. Forgiveness is a decision to release the perpetrator into God's hands and to ask God to show mercy towards them, as we ourselves have been shown mercy. Forgiveness will eventually lead to the healing of anger, pain, and disappointment. But feelings often follow decisions at a distance.

Forgiveness is often not a single choice, but a series of choices.

Deep wounds, whether physical or emotional, often have lingering pain even after healing. If the old anger rises up as you are reminded of the injustice and pain you've suffered, choose to forgive all over again. Take the pain immediately to God in a prayer for mercy to the offender and a declaration of your forgiveness and releasing of them to God's hands. If the wounding is deep, you may have to do this scores of times. This does not mean that the last time was not genuine. It simply means you are being tempted to take it back. Resist the temptation, not by trying to handle it on your own, but by placing it back into God's hands yet again.

Forgiveness is not minimizing the seriousness of the sin or the pain resulting from it.

"That's OK." "Don't worry about it." Such statements are often used when an apology is offered. This leaves us with a

Essential #4 Acceptance

Acceptance defines the enjoyment of a relationship. Acceptance is demonstrated by embracing.

Exodus 20:12, 15, 17

"You shall not steal."

"You shall not covet."

God accepts!

One's level of *acceptance* of life, status, and other people may not be revealed simply by the outward fact that one does not *steal*. However, it is exposed by the inward trait of not *coveting*. Coveting is a desire for that which one does not have and cannot justly possess. Of all the commandments this last one is the clearest evidence of breaking the first one: *having false gods*. As Paul said in Colossians 3:5, "covetousness is idolatry."

Acceptance is foundational because it generates genuine, open and enjoyable relationships. Without it, relationships become shallow, strained and, at best, tolerated.

To review:

Respect defines the existence of a relationship and is demonstrated by listening.

Honesty defines the depth of a relationship and is demonstrated by speaking truth in a loving manner.

Commitment defines the length of a relationship and is demonstrated by serving.

Acceptance defines the enjoyment of a relationship and is demonstrated by embracing.

The essence of "best-friend-ness" is someone who knows us thoroughly and accepts us anyway. This doesn't excuse stubborn resistance to personal change or growth. It is, rather, a realization that all of us are people in process, on a journey of change. As

believers in Jesus, we have the potential and the power to become more like Him on the journey.

Many of us have unwittingly taken on the responsibility to "fix" other people. As conscientious parents we take seriously the responsibility to train, correct, discipline, and guide our children into adulthood. The problem comes when we fail to distinguish between a parent-to-child relationship and that of adult-to-adult relationship. People with high "ought-ness" are often hard on themselves and hard on others. Their high standard of how things "ought to be" robs them of the ability to accept themselves and others in the process.

I will begin by defining acceptance and will then illustrate it.

Acceptance is a realization that human personality is comprised of physical, spiritual, and mental components. This personality is originally God-given and then molded by family background, culture and personal experience. We are all different. We are all unique. We all have individual strengths and weaknesses. We all bear the *image of God* (imperfectly) and the *image of fallen Adam* (perfectly)! God-given *personality traits will not change, e.g. out-going, mechanical, linguistically gifted, or musical. Moral and spiritual traits must radically change, e.g. patient, loving, and kind. *(See page 42)

Acceptance *means* that we make room for immaturity and the growth process without expecting adult behavior out of infants, either physically or spiritually.

Acceptance *does not mean* we excuse or overlook immoral behavior. It does mean that we realize that only God can transform personality. My role in relationships is to listen actively, speak truth in love, patiently endure as a servant, and accept others as God has made them.

Acceptance brings a sense of relaxation and appreciation into a relationship. The opposite is *rejection* characterized by the "walking on egg shells" experience of dealing with people who are always getting upset by what is said or done or not said or done. We

worse, his closest friends became his most aggressive attackers. In the end they resorted to merciless, manufactured attacks on his character and conduct. They accused him of lust, immorality, cruelty, greed, spite and idolatry! Now, read chapter 42 and don't miss this major lesson on forgiveness. (The text with added italics and observations following.)

Job 42:7-10

And so it was, after the LORD had spoken these words to Job, that the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite, *"My wrath is aroused against you and your two friends, for you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has. Now therefore, take for yourselves seven bulls and seven rams, go to My servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and My servant Job shall pray for you. For I will accept him, lest I deal with you according to your folly; because you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has."* So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did as the LORD commanded them; for the LORD had accepted Job. And the LORD restored Job's losses *when he prayed for his friends.*

#1 God is not into disposable relationships. This immense conflict would have, no doubt, resulted in Job and these three men never talking to each other again. God required them to face each other.

#2 God intervened. He reunited these men at an altar of worship. He gave neither the friends nor Job the option of walking away.

#3 God did not begin to restore Job's losses (literally "reverse Job's captivity") **until he had reconciled and interceded for his friends.**

#4 God knew He could count on Job to endure incredible suffering and stay faithful, and He could also count on Job to forgive and intercede for men who hurt him horribly. Perhaps the latter was an even more severe test of his character than the former. The closer a relationship is, the greater the pain and shame of failure. Nothing demonstrates Job's integrity more than his willingness to forgive the betrayal of his dearest friends!

Ephesians 4:32 ðAnd be kind to one another, tenderhearted, *forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.*ö

In answer to the question of ðhow often and how many timesö must we forgive, Jesus told a parable of two debtors. Jesus made reciprocity a key factor in both our motivation as well as our obligation to forgive others. Matthew 18:21-35. Jesus also used another parable of two debtors to teach a man named Simon a lesson about comparative forgiveness and one's own love for God and appreciation of the debt we ourselves have been forgiven of. Luke 7:36-50.

A long look at the cross of Jesus will help us evaluate both the extent of our forgiveness and the cost of it. We see at the cross the undeserved nature of our forgiveness. We see how devastatingly ugly and painful our sins really are. We see the extent of suffering and anguish and pain our own sins have caused the holy Son of God. We get a glimpse of our own unworthiness to be forgiven and in so doing obtain a prepared heart to receive the grace to forgive all those who have betrayed, abused, and mistreated us. Many a day we have been the betrayer, the abuser, and the mistreater. And on that awful, wonderful day all our sins were completely punished on the holy Son of God for our complete forgiveness. Shall we not then have a heart to forgive others equally?

In light of this, Jesus taught us to pray: ð*Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*! ö *As we forgive! As quickly as, as completely as, as willingly as we forgive...others?!!* Do we really want to pray such a prayer? Indeed, we must, if we would be forgiven. Matthew 6:9-15.

There are many examples of incredible forgiveness in the Bible. To name but a few: Jesus, of course, interceding for the men who were putting Him to death (Luke 23:34); Stephen who responded in the same way under the same circumstances (Acts 7:60); and Joseph providing for His brothers both before and after his father's death (Genesis 50). But, perhaps one of the most outstanding and yet overlooked examples is that of Job. This most righteous of men lost every earthly thing that made life worth living. And to make matters

anticipate disapproval and frankly can't wait for the visit to conclude so we can escape it. On the other hand, there is the example of Christ, who was thronged by the wretched and broken, who knew they would find a welcome word and a healing touch.

Matthew 18:5 ðWhoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.ö

Luke 15:2 And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, ðThis Man receives sinners and eats with them.ö (receives = gladly welcomes, embraces)

What a delight to be around those who accept us, even with all our imperfections. They actually motivate us to grow to become more like Christ.

God Himself accepts us in Christ.

Ephesians 1:6 í He has made us *accepted* in the Beloved One.

We are called to accept others in Christ.

Romans 15:7 *Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*

Acceptance is neither natural nor easy when traditions, expectations and past ðnormalsö are different. Our natural tendency is to seek out people who value, think, live, and act like we do. But that was not the milieu of the early church. Consider the Jew/Gentile struggle in Acts. It was huge. Yet the apostles commanded *demonstrable acceptance* in the following passages.

Romans 16:16; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26 Greet one another with a holy kiss.

1Peter 5:14 Greet one another with a kiss of love.

It was tough to demand an embrace when mere proximity was considered compromise! Let's not ignore the command for *demonstrable mutual acceptance* by relegating it to a mere cultural form. If we are not going to ðkiss,ö then let's be sure we use a culturally relevant method of *clearly demonstrating mutual acceptance*.

Jesus said that our mutual love and acceptance of one another would be the clearest demonstration of the gospel we preach to a lost world.

John 17:20-23 "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, *that the world may believe that You sent Me*. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and *that the world may know that You have sent Me*, and have loved them as You have loved Me." (NKJV)

Most people tend to move away from a lack of acceptance and towards appreciation and approval. *Workaholism* is often the result of this desire for acceptance. When a boss approves and rewards while a family complains and criticizes (perhaps justly so), guess where the average individual wants to spend their time? This doesn't justify neglecting one's family, but it does underscore the importance and power of acceptance.

Consider the following questions as you evaluate your own example of the Christ-like quality of acceptance.

1. Would most of those who know me characterize me as an accepting person?
2. Do I know of anyone who avoids me? Do I know why? Could I do something that might improve the relationship?
3. Are there any of my relatives or acquaintances that I am avoiding? Is there something I should do about it?
4. Do I demonstrate acceptance and approval of other believers?
5. When was the last time I expressed gratitude to each of my family members?
6. Have I experienced gratitude or ingratitude more often this week?
7. Have I expressed criticism or complaint recently to a believer?
8. Have I made my acceptance and appreciation equally clear?

Respect	Honesty	Commitment	Acceptance	Forgiveness
<i>I Listen</i>	<i>I Speak</i>	<i>I Serve</i>	<i>I Embrace</i>	<i>I Pray</i>

Essential #5 Forgiveness

Forgiveness defines the growth of a relationship.

Forgiveness is demonstrated by praying for the person I forgive.

Exodus 20:13

"You shall not murder."

God forgives!

Don't you love to be forgiven?

Don't you struggle to forgive?

It's the painful reality of living in a fallen, broken world.

Every relationship I have includes at least one sinner! ME!

Therefore, every relationship I have will be imperfect and will require the frequent application of forgiveness.

The Bible is a book about shattered relationships and restoration.

How serious is forgiveness?

Murder is often the result of a refusal to forgive. Both murder and anger are equated by Jesus and John the apostle.

Matthew 5:21-24

"For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' *But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment.* And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. *First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*"

1 John 3:15 "Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."

The principle is clear: I cannot be right with God and wrong with my brother. Forgiveness is essential and reciprocal; essential because its absence calls one's saving faith into question; reciprocal because we forgive because we ourselves have been forgiven.