

## ***Healthy Attitude Toward Relationships • Romans 12:9-21***

The Garden of Gethsemane was a favorite place of retreat for Jesus. It was located on the Mount of Olives, just outside the eastern “Golden Gate” of the old city of Jerusalem. One memorable Thursday evening Jesus went there to pray to his Father in heaven. He knew he was scheduled for crucifixion the next day and he wanted to discuss a possible cancellation. Three times he asked God to call off the cross. Three times he was refused. Each time Jesus said, “*Not my will, but yours be done.*”

Accepting the sentence of death, Jesus got up and walked through the garden. There he was accosted and arrested by soldiers who had been tipped off to his whereabouts by one of his closest friends. Jesus and Judas had been together for more than three years. The actual betrayal was through an especially heinous act. Judas identified Jesus to the police by kissing him. Jesus knew exactly what was happening; yet he responded by calling Judas “friend”.

After an awful night of illegal trials in a religious court, the Roman governor sentenced Jesus to crucifixion. First Jesus was beaten; then he was turned over to experienced soldiers for execution. They took him to the execution mound, drove iron spikes through his wrists and feet, lifted up the cross and dropped it into a hole that had previously been prepared. Two other men were being executed, one on his right and one on his left. They cursed their executioners, but Jesus prayed saying, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*”

Jesus was amazing. His Father told him “no”, he was betrayed by a close friend, strangers crucified him, yet he maintained good relationships with them all. Jesus had an amazingly healthy attitude toward relationships—and so can we! In Philippians 2:1-5 we read:

*If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interest, but also to the interests of others.*

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.*

Some people have no idea what healthy relational attitudes look like. They have been surrounded by unhealthy attitudes for so long that they have come to think that they are normal. These people are easily offended, angry, unforgiving, upset and self-centered.

Healthy attitudes toward relationships seem strange to some of us. To adopt the attitudes of Jesus may appear to be impossible, but it is not. So, here is our goal for today: “*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.*” One of the best statements of healthy attitudes toward relationships was written by St. Paul in Romans 12:9-21:

*Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*

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*rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.*

*Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:*

*"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."*

*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

A healthy attitude toward relationships begins with reality. Not all relationships are good. Some of the terms used by the Bible when calling us to healthy relationships are words like *evil*, *affliction*, *revenge* and *enemy*.

The reality is that we are all sinners, we all have different opinions and we all approach relationships differently. Many of us don't know how to handle criticism, how to deal with dysfunctional family members or how to respond to people who are different. Strained relationships are a common human experience. That is reality.

I had lunch with a man whose father had just recently died. His father and stepmother had been divorced for more than a decade and he and his stepmother had been estranged for a very long time. As his father's only child he sold the family home and otherwise closed out his father's estate. One of his father's desires was for his former wife to receive half of his small estate. The son called his stepmother, but she refused to talk to him. He traveled across country and drove to her home to give her the money. She refused to answer the door. She would not have any contact with him, not even to receive an inheritance.

I have never had anyone in my life that I wouldn't speak to, so it's hard for me to understand her behavior. But I do understand the reality of such an estranged relationship. You probably know the list better than I do: former spouses who won't be civil to each other long after the divorce is settled; partners who argue about every detail of the business; siblings who can't sit next to each other without calling each other names—and they are both in their 90s!

We often idealize the way relationships are supposed to work. We think everyone is supposed to understand, everyone is supposed to be nice, everyone is supposed to get along, everyone is supposed to agree. When relationships are not as we think they are supposed to be we are hurt, angry or disappointed because they do not meet up to our expectations.

A healthy attitude recognizes that people don't get along, that people misbehave and that no relationships are perfect. Sometimes bad relationships are caused by evil intentions, but more often, bad behavior and bad relationships are because people don't know any better and they just mess up.

Reality is that some people will never behave the way we want them to behave and that we will never have the kind of relationships with them that we would like to have. Reality is that some of life's relationships are wonderful and some are not.

The healthiest of attitudes is to realize that we cannot control the attitudes and actions of others but we can control our own attitudes and actions. If we are ever to have a healthy attitude toward relationships, we need to recognize these realities.

A healthy attitude adds love to reality. There is nothing more Christian and nothing healthier than to love others regardless of the way they behave. Love is thinking and acting in a positive and caring manner toward the other person regardless of their attitude or behavior. It assumes that someone should behave like a Christian, someone should be the adult, someone should do what is good and someone should do what is right. Paul writes in Romans 12:9-10,

*“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.”*

“Sincere” literally means “without wax”. The Greeks used wax to patch cracks and cover defects in marble statues. They looked okay at night or in cool weather but outside in the heat the wax melted and revealed the defects. Sincere love is the real thing. It looks the same even when relationships heat up.

*“Hate what is evil; cling to what is good”* is really good practical advice. We should constantly be looking for the good in every relationship and hold on to it. But that is not to deny that there is evil. Love never requires us to like what is evil. We love the person, but we do not condone the misbehavior of that person. It is okay to disapprove of what is inappropriate.

*“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love”* implies that we have a familial relationship. Decide to be committed to the other person as a family member. Do what you have to do whether they do what is right or not.

*“Honor one another above yourselves”* is probably the healthiest and most practical advice of all. It is very easy to see things only from our point of view. In love we should focus on the other person more than worrying about how they treat us. Don’t disrespect someone because he owes you money. Don’t refuse to speak to someone because they put you down. Think of ways to honor the person whether or not that person is nice to you. That is a healthy Christian attitude and approach to relationships.

Do you remember a time when you felt really healthy about yourself? Maybe it was when you lost ten pounds, ran ten miles or ate a veggie burger instead of a quarter-pounder with fries. It felt good to do something healthy.

The same thing is true in the attitudes we have. Try loving someone who doesn’t have it coming. Try honoring the other person whether

or not they deserve it. It is probably your best shot at a better relationship, but even if it doesn’t heal the relationship you will feel good about your healthy attitude of honoring one another above yourself.

Part of this healthy attitude of loving is forgiving. Some psychologists say there is a clear and definite link between forgiving and happiness. Unhappy people are often unforgiving people while forgiving people are often the happiest people of all. So, if you struggle with happiness in life, a good place to begin is to ask whether or not you are reluctant to forgive others.

Forgiveness is letting go of revenge. It means I don’t have to have the money back from the person who borrowed it in order to have a good

relationship with that person. It means I let go of my bad attitude toward somebody even if that person never asks for forgiveness. It means I’m willing to move on even though

I have been treated poorly.

Forgiveness doesn’t mean you caved in. It doesn’t mean you were wrong. It doesn’t mean you have condoned inappropriate behavior. It doesn’t mean you are weak. It simply means that you have chosen to let it go. You are no longer going to expect the other person to make it right. You are no longer going to try to get even. You are no longer going to let this bother you. But most of all, forgiveness means that as a Christian you are going to trust God to handle what you can’t. Romans 12:19-20 puts it like this:

*Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary:*

*“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”*

This has to be one of the most wonderful and one of the strangest quotes in the Bible. It

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tells us that we have a choice in our attitude about getting even—do it ourselves or let God take care of it. No one in their right mind thinks they can do something better than God! Besides, why bother if God will take care of it for us. So, just forgive others and let God worry about revenge if it is needed. And practically, when we are nice and forgiving, “*In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.*” This is a figure of speech. It means that the person might end up feeling embarrassed and guilty because you are so nice when they are so wrong and this might help them to change for the better.

One of the biggest parts of a healthy attitude toward relationships is taking the initiative. Don’t ever leave good relationships up to the other person. You be the person who is Christian.

I love the way Christians treat me. I love the relationships I have with Christians. Okay, most Christians! Some aren’t so nice. But, for the most part, Christians are kind, generous, forgiving, gracious and loving to me. It shows the most when I’m not that way with them. When I say things I wish I hadn’t said, when I forget to do things I should have done Christians cut me a lot of slack. They give me the benefit of the doubt. And for that I am deeply, deeply grateful. This makes me want to be the kind of person they treat me as being. When Christians take the initiative toward me to have a good relationship it makes me into a better person. It makes me want to take the same initiative toward others.

There was a Volkswagen ad on television that pictured a series of people in relationships on a city street corner. Everyone was nice to each other—opening doors, smiling, saying hello and building warm and positive relationships. The actions occurred sequentially—one nice action led to another that then led to another. In the ad, the camera ran in fast reverse to see where it all started. It started with a Volkswagen Beetle convertible driving by the corner. The sight of the car made one person feel good enough to be nice to the next and then to the next. It was sequential, progressive and contagious.

In Romans 12:11-18 we read:

*Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

*Do not repay anyone for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

May you have a healthy attitude toward relationships. May you be just like Jesus!

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