

Building Stronger Relationships

On Sunday, we continued our New Year's sermon series called "Getting Myself Together," taking some time to evaluate how we're doing in our key relationships.

1. Relationships of all kinds are complicated – with spouses, children, parents, siblings, friends, people at work, and people at church. Even the best relationships can be challenging and bad relationships can quickly become toxic. On Sunday, Jeff showed a scene from the classic movie "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" In the scene, Martha and George attack one another viciously.
 - a. As you watched the scene, how did it make you feel?
 - b. What's the worst relationship you ever experienced? What made it so bad?
2. If you were to make a list of the five most important relationships in your life right now and give yourself a letter grade for how you're doing in those relationships, what would your grade be? Tell us why you choose the grade you do.
3. However good or bad our relationships are, we always have room for growth. On Sunday, we covered four principles that can help us build stronger relationships. With each principle, Jeff gave us a self-evaluation question to consider. The first principle came from Sunday's Scripture passage. Read I John 4:7-12 and 19-21.
 - a. How would you summarize the primary point being made by this passage?
 - b. Given what John says in this passage, is it possible for a person who is genuinely spiritually mature to be bad at relationships? Why or why not?
 - c. Read again the poem Jeff shared on Sunday (found on p. 3). In what way does this poem speak to you?
 - d. All this leads to **Self-Evaluation Question No. 1: Am I giving enough time, energy, and focus to key relationships in my life?** How do you answer?
4. The second principle is a lesson we can draw from our pets. Most of us show endless patience and mercy to our pets. When our dog or cat does something annoying, we tend to think, "He's just being a dog," or "She's just being a cat." Jeff told how, when his dog does something annoying, he usually laughs it off, saying, "You crazy." Jeff suggested we take the same approach to our spouses, children, parents, and coworkers. Instead of stressing, just say, "You crazy," smile, and move on with life.
 - a. If God showed you the same amount of patience and mercy – no more, no less – as you typically show those closest to you, would you be happy about that?
 - b. Psalm 103:17 says, "The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting." On a practical level, what does that mean?
 - c. Psalm 103:14 says, "God knows how we were made and remembers that we are but dust." What does that mean?

d. All this leads to **Self-Evaluation Question No. 2: Am I as tolerant toward the people in my life as I am toward my pets?** How do you answer?

5. The third principle is drawn from clinical research. An important study done by the University of Georgia concluded that the “most consistent predictor” of happy marriages was whether one’s spouse regularly expresses gratitude. The research of relationship expert John Gottman led him to a similar conclusion: “Kindness glues couples together. There is a great deal of evidence showing that the more someone receives or witnesses kindness, the more they will be kind themselves, which leads to upward spirals of love and generosity in a relationship.”

a. When have you experienced an “upward spiral” from kindness expressed in a relationship?

b. Proverbs 16:24 says, “Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.” Proverbs 18:21 says, “Life and death are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.” What do you hear these verses saying?

c. All this leads to **Self-Evaluation Question No. 3: Are the words I’m sowing into my relationships creating positive synergy?** How do you answer?

6. The final principle is drawn from life experience, including that of Duke University’s dominant men’s basketball program. Asked why they’re so successful, Duke’s coach said, “In our program, the truth is the basis of all we do. There’s nothing more important than the truth because there’s nothing more powerful than the truth. Consequently, on our team we always tell one another the truth.” This observation runs counter to our instinct to “go easy” on those we love.

a. Proverbs 27:5 says, “Open rebuke is better than hidden love.” What do you think that means?

b. In his training to work in therapeutic environments for youth, Pastor Chris was taught that “feedback is sacred” and the only acceptable response to feedback is “thank you.” How does that sit with you?

c. When has someone given you feedback that was difficult to hear, but helped you much?

d. All this leads to **Self-Evaluation Question No. 4: Do I love enough to share (and hear) honest feedback in my relationships?** How do you answer?

7. Of the four self-evaluation questions we’ve discussed, which is most challenging to you – and why? As you ponder your own 2019 Spiritual Action Plan, do you feel you need to incorporate a relationship goal? If so, what might your goal be?

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I ran into a stranger as he passed by,
“Oh excuse me please” was my reply.
He said, “Please excuse me too;
I wasn’t watching for you.”
We were very polite, this stranger and I.
We went on our way and we said goodbye.
But at home a different story is told,
How we treat our loved ones, young and old.
Later that day, cooking the evening meal,
My son stood beside me very still

My son stood beside me very still.
When I turned, I nearly knocked him down.
“Move out of the way,” I said with a frown.
He walked away, his little heart broken.
I didn’t realize how harshly I’d spoken.

While I lay awake that night in my bed,
God’s still small voice came to me and said,
“While dealing with a stranger, common courtesy you use,
But the children you love, you seem to abuse.
Go out and look on the kitchen floor,
You’ll find some flowers there by the door.
Those are the flowers he brought for you.
He picked them himself: pink, yellow, and blue.
He stood very quietly not to spoil the surprise,
And you never saw the tears that filled his eyes.”

By this time I felt very small,
And now my tears began to fall.
I quietly went and knelt by his bed.
“Wake up, little one,” I said.
Are these the flowers you picked for me?”
He smiled, “I found them out back by the tree.
I picked them because they’re pretty like you.
I knew you’d like them, especially the blue.”

I said, “Son, I’m very sorry for the way I acted today.
I shouldn’t have yelled at you that way.”
He said, “Oh, Mom, that’s ok. I love you anyway.”
I said, “Son, I love you too,
And I do like the flowers, especially the blue.”

Note: If you would like another copy of the template for creating a Spiritual Action Plan, go to this link, <http://lifejourney.church/docs/goingdeeper/010619.pdf>, and scroll down to page 3.