

INTRODUCTION

God gives us so many reminders of His great love for us. Sometimes we miss these reminders, but here's one we don't have to miss. Last week, after a brief thunderstorm, one of our members caught a picture of a rainbow over our church building. We don't believe there's a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow; we see it as a reminder of God's covenant that a flood will never destroy our planet again.

We're going to talk about relationships in this message. Author J. Allan Petersen was a Christian author and speaker who wrote *The Myth of the Greener Grass* and several other good books. He traveled the world extensively teaching seminars on marriage and the family. He tells the story about boarding a Boeing 747 in Brazil one evening for a return trip to the U.S. He was just settling down to rest when the captain came on and announced they had a serious emergency. Three of the four engines had shut down because of fuel contamination, and the fourth engine was struggling. They were trying to turn back and land at the airport. The flight attendants sprang into action and told everyone to do exactly what they said. Allan said he had flown millions of miles, but this was the first time something like this had happened. They were instructed to close the shades on the windows, and assume a crash position bent over holding their legs. He said, that no one could tell how close they were to the ground and the flight attendants yelled, "Prepare for impact!"

Allan said everyone was praying, most of them in Portuguese. He found himself praying as well. He prayed, "God, thank you for allowing me to know you and to serve you. But oh, God, my wife! My sons. Please take care of them!"

Since he was writing about this scary event, obviously, they landed safely. As he reflected on his near-death experience, he realized he wasn't even thinking about the broken photocopier or when he needed to change his oil. He was thinking of only one thing—relationships. Why? Because once you boil it down, relationships are the most important things we have in this life.

Paul is coming to the end of this wonderful letter. He concludes the long section on the second coming by telling them to encourage one another and build each other up. Then beginning in verse twelve he tells them *how* to build each other up. In this passage there are seven guidelines for healthy relationships.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-15. "Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else."

In 2001, we began the Tyler-Quijing partnership. It's been a wonderful experience. Over the first few years of the partnership, the government leaders of the city welcomed us and met with us. It was important for us to learn how to behave in that culture, so we had everyone read a book on Chinese business etiquette.

For instance, in China, it is customary to exchange small gifts. So we tried to find gifts relating to Tyler or Texas. At the Tyler Rose Museum gift shop, we found some very nice paperweights that had a Tyler rose on the top. I noticed on the back that it said, "Made in China." So we bought them, and took them BACK to China to give as gifts! We learned that the Chinese refuse a gift three times. So you have to keep asking them to please accept the gift. After the third offer, they accept the gift, but they set it aside and don't open it until you're gone. They don't want the chance of you seeing disappointment in their face if they didn't like the gift.

Meals are served at a round table with a large lazy Susan in the center. You only have a small plate, so you don't load it up with food. As the lazy Susan spins slowly in front of you, you take your chopsticks and take only a small amount. The most interesting thing I learned is that it's impolite to clean your plate. If you clean your plate, it indicates you're still not satisfied. So you always have to leave some uneaten food on your plate. So, all those years that my parents told me to clean my plate because there were starving children in China, they were wrong. Those Chinese children weren't even cleaning their plates!

The point I'm making is that because China is a different culture, we relate to them in a way that is different than how we related to each other as Americans.

That's also true of Christians. We live in a dog-eat-dog, me-first culture. But because we are followers of Jesus Christ, we operate under a different set of rules and customs. Let's examine these seven guidelines for healthy relationships.

1. RESPECT YOUR SPIRITUAL LEADERS

He starts by writing, "Respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work." Paul was a pastor and an apostle. He had also appointed pastors and elders in the church in Thessalonica. He starts by saying that these spiritual leaders should be shown love and respect.

Some congregations don't do that very well. Did you hear about the pastor who was in the hospital? The chairman of the deacons came and said, "Pastor, I want you to know that our deacons voted 12 to 7 to pray for your recovery."

You may be wondering, "What's he going to do? Tell us that we must love and respect him because he's the pastor?" The short answer is, "yes." But there's more. First, let me go on record of saying that over the 22 years I've served here, I've received a daily average of five emails or notes from members telling me that you love me and are praying for me. I get the other kind, too, but I forget those. So, thank you for showing me appreciation and respect. If all congregations did what you do, we'd have a lot more healthy churches.

But this verse is about all of the spiritual leaders in our church. Of course, it includes our staff team. We have the best staff team of any church in America, and I encourage you to us every opportunity you have to show your appreciation to them.

This respect also flows to the thousands of volunteers who serve the Lord by serving you. Who qualifies? Look again who Paul included. He mentioned those who work hard among you, and who admonish you. That means to teach and to encourage. I hope it shows, but I devote many hours every week to digging into God's Word to bring you messages to encourage and challenge you. But we have hundreds of teachers who do the same in their Sunday Morning Bible Study classes—and most of them are holding down other jobs as well. This morning, I was in John Child's class to show appreciation to Virbel and Sue Trotter who have been serving the Lord there for forty years.

Why should we respect our leaders? In Hebrews we read, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy and not with grief." (Hebrews 13:17 HCSB)

We have one main leader at Green Acres. His name is Jesus. All the rest of us are slaves of Jesus. I believe with all my heart, that one day I will stand before God and give an account for how I served you as pastor of this church. I want to remind every SMBS teacher, leader, and ministry volunteer that we should lead with a servant's heart. And one day we'll give an account for how we served.

So, take a moment and ask the Holy Spirit to bring the face and name of one of your spiritual leaders. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you ideas on how you can express your love and appreciation for them.

2. LIVE PEACEFULLY WITH OTHERS

Paul continued with this bit of relational advice, "Live in peace with each other." If you've ever been in a congregation where there is division and strife, you know it's a very unpleasant experience. The devil wants to divide. He wants to divide marriages, divide families, and divide churches. I've heard of churches splitting over the most trivial matters. In Western Kentucky there was once a church called No-Peg Baptist Church. In the 1890s this little church had two deacons. One deacon drove a wooden peg in the small vestibule so the circuit-riding preacher could hang his coat. The other deacon got so mad for not being consulted on the decision, the church split, and the peg was removed. For decades that church was called No-Peg Baptist Church.

I'm pleased that Green Acres is a happy, unified family. When I teach my new member dinner, I ask all the new members to safeguard the precious unity we enjoy here at Green Acres. I've discovered that some Christians are peacemakers, and others are troublemakers. We all should pray, "Lord, make me a peacemaker, not a trouble maker."

Now, there are some mean people in the world who just refuse to let you live peacefully with them. That's why Paul wrote in in Romans, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Romans 12:18) I've often said lawyers like this verse because it contains a loophole. The command is to live at peace with everyone, but the loophole is, "As much as it depends on you."

Is there any fellow believer you can think of and you and this person have a wall of animosity standing between you? Something happened in the past that disrupted your relationship? You are not living at peace with each other. Your job is to offer to restore peace between the two of you. They may agree, and you have healed a broken relationship. But they may refuse. If so, you can still live at peace with God because you have done what He has required.

3. EMPOWER OTHERS TO BE PRODUCTIVE

Paul wrote, "Warn those who are idle." Some translations use the word "unruly." It refers to someone who has no discipline and they are going in the wrong direction. This same Greek word was used for Roman soldier who went AWOL.

When you see a friend or family member who is going in the wrong direction, it is our responsibility to lovingly warn them that they need to get back on the right track. Imagine you are driving behind a friend at night and you notice their car beginning to drift off the road. You suspect they're dozing off. What are you going to do? You'll blow your horn, flash your headlights, or call them on their cell and warn them to wake up and steer in the right direction. The worst thing you can do is to ignore them when you see them heading toward danger. Do you know someone who is drifting away from God, or drifting into a danger area? Don't let them go. Warn them.

Some of the newer cars have warning sensors built into the seats, so that if you drift from one lane to the other, it taps you on your bottom. I was driving a friend's new Cadillac the other day and when I changed lanes slowly, I felt the seat sensor drumming into my hip. That could save your life—or it could be irritating. It's a feature you can turn off, by the way. But that's what we ought to be for our brothers and sisters. If we see them drifting into a danger zone, we need to tap, tap, tap, tap them between the eyes and say, "Hey! Wake up! You're going in the wrong direction!"

In the context of these letters, there were members of the church who were so preoccupied by waiting for the return of Jesus that they were idle. They weren't working and taking care of their families. Paul wrote to Timothy, "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." (1 Timothy 5:8)

If you're going to warn someone, you must make sure your motive is love. If you're just angry and frustrated at someone for his or her spiritual laziness, it's not going to go well. You have to ask God to purify your motives and warn them, because you love them and you don't want them to drift away into the danger zone.

4. ENCOURAGE THOSE WHO ARE AFRAID

Paul wrote, "Encourage the timid." The word "timid" doesn't mean, "shy," it means someone who is fearful of going on. There are times in life when we feel like quitting. It's true of pastors. According to the Francis Schaeffer Institute, 75% of pastors who start out in the ministry will drop out in the first ten years. Only 1 in 10 pastors who start out will retire while still in the ministry. It's called burnout. And whatever career you're in, I'm sure the burnout and the

dropout rate is high as well.

There are people all around you who are struggling and they need someone to come up to them and say, "You're good at what you do. Hang in there. You can do it. Don't give up." One of the best ways to encourage people who are fearful is to give them the Word of God. It is full of promises of encouragement. One of my favorites is where God said, "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." (Isaiah 41:10)

I was watching *The Blind Side* movie again a couple of weeks ago. Michael Oher had tremendous potential, but he was afraid to really give it his all. In football practice, he was awful. The coach said, "Well, at least he'll scare the opposing team getting off the bus, until they realize that he's a big marshmallow. He looks like Tarzan but plays like Jane." That's when Leigh Anne Tuohy, played by Sandra Bullock stopped practice and pulled Michael aside and said, "This team is your family. You have to protect them, from them." And she pointed to the defense. She pulled the quarterback over and said, "You need to protect his blind side. When you look at him, you think of me. Okay? Are you going to protect your family, Michael?" He said, "Yes ma'am." And the rest is NFL history since Michael was a first round draft pick for the Baltimore Ravens.

5. SUPPORT THE WEAK

Paul wrote, "Help the weak." The KJV says, "Support the weak" and that's a good translation because the word literally means to hold someone up. It's a picture of me approaching someone who can't stand and I take him or her by the shoulders and I keep them upright.

The world's attitude toward those who are weak is to belittle or to make fun of them. But in our culture, we love and support those who are weaker than us. We all know people who are weak. They may be spiritually weak, mentally weak, or physically weak. Our job is not to overpower them, but to undergird them. To support them in any way we can.

Elsewhere Paul wrote, "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves." (Romans 15:1)

When I was seventeen, I spent the summer as a lifeguard at the state Baptist camp in Alabama. We had RAs, GAs, and several thousand young people at the camp, and it seemed that all of them wanted to swim. The very first thing we did was to require that everyone find a "buddy." This would be someone who would keep an eye on them. With a hundred kids swimming in the pool, it was hard to see if someone might be in trouble. So about every fifteen minutes I would blow the whistle and say, "Buddy check!" Everyone stopped swimming and found their buddy and held up their hand.

I think that's a great idea in the church. We all need a buddy who can help us through our tough times. That's really what our Stephen ministry does. It pairs up people who have been struggling with someone who can listen and pray for them.

Who needs a Christian buddy? When someone has suffered a death of a spouse or divorce, they

need a spiritual buddy to help them. When someone has gotten out of jail, they need a buddy. When someone has suffered a life-threatening illness, they need a buddy. When they've lost a job, they need a buddy. Look around. Ask yourself, "To whom can I be a spiritual 'buddy?'"

6. BE PATIENT WITH EVERYONE

Paul wrote, "Be patient with everyone." We're so impatient. Think about transportation. Two hundred and fifty years ago if you missed a stage coach you'd say, "No problem, there will be another one tomorrow." Or 100 years ago, if you missed a train, you'd say, "No problem, there will be another one in a few hours." Today, if we had to sit through more than one cycle of a traffic light, we start pounding the steering wheel.

Solomon wrote, "A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel." (Proverbs 15:18) The world is full of people who have road rage, and yell and shake their fists at people who slow them down. But in the family of God, we are to be people who demonstrate patience.

In 1 Corinthians 13 he wrote, "Love is patient." The Greek word for patience is a beautiful word picture. It comes from two words. The first is *makros*, which means "large." We use the word macro for something big. The second word is *thumos*, which means anger or "boiling point." A patient person is someone who doesn't have a short fuse or a hair-trigger temper. They don't become angry quickly. Another word for patience is "longsuffering." Patience isn't easy; sometimes it seems like suffering.

Before you lose your patience and strike out at someone, try this. Walk a mile in their shoes. That way, they're barefoot and a mile away—and you have their shoes.

7. BE KIND TO THOSE WHO HAVE WRONGED YOU

Paul wrote, "Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other." Revenge is a human instinct. If someone throws an object at your face, your instinct is to raise your hands to protect yourself. If you lose your balance, your hands instinctively move out to catch yourself. If someone hurts you, your instinct is to hurt them back. When someone insults you, your emotional instinct is to say, "Same to you, buddy, and more of it." But as followers of Jesus Christ, we follow a different set of relationship rules. We don't repay evil with evil; instead we repay evil with good.

That Apostle Peter wrote, "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing." (1 Peter 3:9)

CONCLUSION

How you relate to others speaks much louder than the words you speak to them. We are going to face hostility and rejection in the world, but we are called upon to show everyone the love of Christ.

We were blessed to have another spiritual giant in our midst for a few years. David Wilkerson lived his final years here in East Texas and died in a car accident two years ago. He's buried beside his wife in the Lindale City Cemetery. David was a pastor of a small church in Indiana when God broke his heart for the gangs in New York City. He moved there and started trying to show them the love of Jesus. His story became the book, *The Cross and the Switchblade*. It's well named because, as you can imagine, those gangs weren't exactly thrilled about a Midwestern pastor trying to get into their inner circles. One of the most violent gang members was named Nicky Cruz, and David knew if he could win Nicky, other gang members would follow. He confronted Nicky many times and finally Nicky was irritated with this hick preacher. He pulled out his switchblade and said, "I'm gonna cut you to pieces." David Wilkerson looked him in the eye and said, "And if you do, every piece will cry out that Jesus loves you, Nicky."

Nicky eventually became a Christian, and then an evangelist. He was here in Tyler to speak at David's funeral a couple of years ago.

I challenge each of us to show that kind of radical love to a world that is desperately in need of the truth that their Creator loves them.

OUTLINE

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"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." *Romans 12:18*

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"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." *Isaiah 41:10*

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes