

Relationships Good and Bad

RELATIONSHIPS ARE ESSENTIAL

From the moment we are born, we find ourselves in relationships with others—parents, family, friends, and the wider community. It is in the context of these relationships that we grow to find out who we are, and where we belong. These relationships are essential to our life and being. All other physical needs may be supplied to us, but without direct close relationships—what we call ‘love’—we fail to thrive. The people with whom we are related are part of the make-up of who we are as persons, and we cannot live fully without them.

RELATIONSHIPS—POWER FOR GOOD

An ancient yet fresh little Hebrew song, found in the Bible, extols the value of good relationships:

How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.

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It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the LORD ordained his blessing,
life forevermore (Ps. 133).

Not only are these relationships warmly spoken of in pictures of perfumed oil anointing a body, or of dew falling on the mountains; they are also linked with the blessing of God, even with life that has a quality of eternity. The overall picture is one of blessing from above.

This would be borne out in the experience of many. Husbands and wives have known companionship, help and strength in each other through faithful and lifelong marriages. Parents and children, brothers and sisters, cousins and extended family can know a bond and belonging that is deeper than mere acquaintance. Friendship can sometimes be even more significant than family:

... a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin (Prov. 18:24).

The book of Proverbs in the Bible sums up the good value of both friends and family:

A friend loves at all times,
and kinsfolk are born to share adversity (Prov. 17:17).

Sometimes we get a sense of belonging to an even wider network of relationships throughout the community, including possibly people we do not know. The poet and preacher John Donne gave classic expression to this:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind . . .¹

¹ John Donne (1572–1631), *Meditation XVII*, accessed from website 7 May 08, <<http://isu.indstate.edu/ilnprof/ENG451/ISLAND/meditation.html>>.

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Certainly we can underestimate or take for granted the immeasurable benefits we have—in knowledge, wisdom, and provisions of every kind—from belonging to the wider community, and from being connected with the whole of humanity, in the present, and across the generations.

John Donne was writing from within the experience of Christian faith, and giving expression to what he found there. Paul the apostle spoke of belonging to Jesus Christ as equivalent to being part of a human body. No part of the body can say, ‘I do not belong to the body’, nor can any part of the body say to any other part, ‘I have no need of you’ (1 Cor. 12:15–16, 21). All are to benefit from belonging to Christ and to each other in the body:

... speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love (Eph. 4:15–16).

Indeed, the Bible claims that, as human beings, we are made by love for love. We have been created by a God who Himself is love (see 1 John 4:8, 16), in order to love God and to love one another (see Deut. 6:4–5; Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:37–39). The final outcome of God’s purposes for the universe is depicted in relational terms: a marriage, a family, a city of people (see Rev. 19:6–9; 21:2, 7), where all is well.

Each of us, no doubt, could think of a relationship in which another person has contributed significantly to our own well-being. Clearly, relationships can be a power for good in our lives.



RELATIONSHIPS—POWER FOR HARM

Simply because relationships are so crucial for human beings, there is a great power inherent in them. Our very need for love, and the importance to us of those with whom we are in relationship, invest our relationships with a power that we can exercise towards others, and that others who are in relationship with us can exercise towards us. The closer the relationship, the greater the power. We have seen how this can be, and is intended to be, a power for good. In this, however, lies also a potential for great harm. When the power inherent in a relationship of love and trust is abused, massive damage in people's lives can result. This usually happens when one person pursues his or her own pleasure and advantage at the expense of another.

The Bible traces this abuse of power in human relationships to our original defiance of God and His purposes for us (see Gen. 3:1–6). The first man and woman, though they belonged to one another, then began to see themselves as over against each other (see Gen. 2:24; 3:12, 16). In the next generation, this came out in the murder of Abel by his brother Cain; again accompanied by a measure of dissociation: 'am I my brother's keeper?' (see Gen. 4:1–9). From there the situation degenerated to the point where 'The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually', and 'the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence' (Gen. 6:5, 11).

In the course of his ministry, the prophet Jeremiah (around 600 BC) was warned by God:

Beware of your neighbors,
and put no trust in any of your kin;
for all your kin are supplanters,
and every neighbor goes around like a slanderer.

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They all deceive their neighbors,
and no one speaks the truth;
they have taught their tongues to speak lies;
they commit iniquity and are too weary to repent.
Oppression upon oppression, deceit upon deceit!
They refuse to know me, says the LORD (Jer. 9:4–6).

The prophet Micah (around 750 BC) had found the same thing:

Put no trust in a friend,
have no confidence in a loved one;
guard the doors of your mouth
from her who lies in your embrace;
for the son treats the father with contempt,
the daughter rises up against her mother,
the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
your enemies are members of your own household
(Micah 7:5–6).

Similarly, Jesus himself warned his followers: ‘one’s foes will be members of one’s own household’ (Matt. 10:36). When those closest to us are against us, then are we at our most vulnerable:

See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves . . .

—we require great wisdom to be able to keep ourselves innocent in such a situation—

. . . so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Matt. 10:16).

Even within the church, Jesus warned, will be those who seek to do others harm, under deceptive appearances:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves (Matt. 7:15).

Power in Relationships

Because they are so vital to us, all relationships have within them an inherent power, which can be used either for good or for evil. Our concern here is that it be used for good. Part of that will be to discern wisely when such power is being exercised beneficially, and when it is being abused. Given our capacity for self-deception, and our willingness to be deceived by others, that exercise is not always an easy one.

BONDAGE AND FREEDOM

One way of identifying whether a relationship is healthy or abusive can be found in whether it engenders freedom in a person, or brings them into some kind of bondage. Jesus spoke to some who, even in a religious community that purported to be free (see John 8:33), were in bondages of their own and others' making:

Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin (John 8:34).

In contrast, Jesus saw himself not as a slave, but as a truly free son of the household:

The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever (John 8:35).

As such, Jesus said, he had come to set free those in bondage:

So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed (John 8:36).

This freedom would be gained by coming out of deception and into the truth—of Jesus himself and of God—through the word spoken by Jesus:

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If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free (John 8:31–32).

Paul the apostle came into this freedom himself (see 1 Cor. 9:1) and, by the message he proclaimed, saw many come into this same freedom—from sin, judgement, death, fleshly lusts, and a bad conscience, from evil powers, idolatrous fixations, worldly expectations, and legalistic obligations (see Acts 13:39; Rom. 6:18; 7:6; 8:2, 21; Gal. 1:4; 5:24; 1 Cor. 12:2; Col. 2:13–15; 1 Thess. 5:9; 1 Tim. 1:5). Even so, he found to his sorrow and anger that those who had come into this wonderful freedom only too readily submitted again to bondage, especially when certain powerful personages, for apparently the noblest reasons, imposed on them demanding religious obligations (such as the need to be circumcised; see Gal. 3:1–5; 5:2–12; 6:12–15). To them Paul made his appeal:

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Gal. 5:1).

Even (or perhaps especially) in the church, where this precious freedom had come, the apostles needed to warn and guard against relationships being used to bring people into bondage. The same gospel word that brought people into freedom was needed afresh to keep them there.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

- *What experience have we had of relationships that have contributed significantly to our well-being?*
- *What have we known of relationships that have caused damage in people's lives? What has been the harmful factor?*

Power in Relationships

- *How do the categories of freedom and bondage help us discern the difference between good and bad relationships?*