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STUCK IN A TOXIC RELATIONSHIP
Speaker: Laird Crump

Video: Finding Nemo – Fish are friends not food.

Stuck in a Toxic Relationship

You gotta feel for Dorrie and Marlin. Although Bruce the shark was trying to reform his cruel ways, those old patterns and appetites got the better of him and he couldn't help but want to bite someone's head off.

Have you ever had that experience with a friend? Have you ever felt that you were getting close to someone and then all of a sudden you are involved in a shark attack? Sure you have. Regardless of the quality of friendship, toxicity can seep in.

Joey and I were watching one of those Friday night documentaries that told the story of a woman who had the unfortunate luck of having several of her husband's die. One would die, then she'd marry another. But within a few years husband number two was dead. So she married number three and sure enough after a few years, he too kicked the bucket. Eventually people started to see a pattern. Either this woman was bad luck or something sinister was going on. After much investigation it was discovered that she was slowly poisoning her husband's with small amounts of antifreeze in their food every week. Eventually the toxins would be so abundant in the fellows system that he would die. Now there are several lessons in this story, such as always know who is doing your food prep, or don't marry a wacko. But also, seriously, another lesson is that even small amounts of toxins can kill you over the long haul.

You can easily see the correlation to our relationships. None of us are going to poison our spouse, family or friends with toxic chemicals, but **we can severely damage relationships with toxic behaviours**. How are we to handle toxic relationships? That's what Ken has asked me to speak on today.

People are like a double edged sword. On the one hand, family and friends can be extremely enjoyable. In fact, life is all about relationships. When relationships are good, life is good. On the other hand, family and friends "gone bad" can be extremely dangerous. As one poster said: It's hard to soar with eagles when you have to live with turkeys!

Listen to what author Dave Simpson (pastor and former roommate of mine) says about this.

"I have learned that "draining people" cost energy and passion, and that effective people who permit an imbalance of contact with these people can expect to pay a massive bill of inner exhaustion. You and I need to be aware of the effect that difficult people have on us".

All of us are very aware of environmental disasters, such as the recent oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico. The toxins released into the water have had horrible effects and will continue to have horrible effects for years.

Toxic relationships can have similar effects.

Dave Simpson suggests that just as there are toxins which are various kinds of poisons, so there are many kinds of toxic personalities that come in a variety of forms. When the toxins are released into a friendship then the poison can be hazardous to one's health and sometimes can even kill the relationship.

Dave Simpson refers to three kind of toxins, three kinds of behaviours, that can pervade friendships.

Types of Difficult Behaviour

1. **Complainers:** This is when a person becomes negative about everything and anything. This attitude needs to quickly be exposed and dealt with in relationships because negativity is a toxin that spreads like a cancer
2. **Critics:** This is another toxin that can be released into friendships. Chuck Swindol says of this: "You cannot constantly hear criticism and negativism without having some of it rub off on you. If you are prone to discouragement, you can't run the risk of spending a lot of your time with people who traffic in discouraging and critical information."
3. **Competitors:** Competition is not limited to athletics. When friends become competitive, that spirit releases toxins into the relationship. The result is not that one person wins and the other loses. Actually when someone is competitive in a friendship, both people lose.

Simpson concludes by saying:

"The fact is, toxic relationships drain you, emotionally and spiritually. Toxic relationships can cause a high level of stress, discomfort, tension, aggravation and unhappiness. Whenever possible attempts should be made to detoxify the relationship."

Like Bruce the shark, everyone needs to realize, people are friends not food. It is so important that we treat each friendship with extreme care and avoid releasing toxins into the relationship.

So what do you do when you are stuck in a toxic relationship?

Good question, but first we need to define and describe what a toxic relationship is. When speaking of toxic relationships I am not speaking of the normal conflict that couples, families and friends have, nor the idiosyncrasies people have that bug us. I am talking about behaviours that harm others. We should be careful in labeling a relationship as being toxic.

What is a toxic relationship?

A toxic relationship is one in which you are being or feeling harmed either emotionally, mentally or physically.

Now of course there can be degrees of harm so let me give you a few examples of severe toxicity.

Signs of Toxicity

When your spouse/partner/friend/family member...

- Won't let you see or speak to others
- Experiences jealous fits of rage
- Consistently invades your privacy
- Causes you to feel as if you have to walk on egg shells
- Is passive/aggressive
- Consistently manipulates you so that they always get their way
- Coerces you to do things you wouldn't normally do
- Speaks abusively to you with put downs and swear words

Now you may ask:

Why do people stay in toxic relationships?

That too is a good question.

- Often, people stay in an abusive relationship because they do not understand that they have rights and options.
- Low self-esteem can be a factor in remaining in a toxic relationship. Some people feel like they probably couldn't do any better than what they have.
- Depression is also a factor, which is both a cause and effect of living with a toxic person.
- The fear of being alone is another factor
- Sometimes people stay in a toxic relationship because the toxic person threatens them if they express thoughts of terminating the relationship.
- Sometimes, people stay because the toxic relationship so much mirrors their lives as children. They think their situation is normal.

Well, let me make a few common sense suggestions about dealing with toxic relationships and then I want to look at some passages from the Bible that gives us a better way.

And maybe we can learn something from the recent oil crisis in the Gulf of Mexico. Here are some common sense suggestions. They are just that, common sense, but when in a relationship with a toxic person we tend often to lose our common sense. So these are just some reminders.

Common Sense Reminders

1. **Don't minimize the damage toxicity creates.**

Wasn't it annoying when BP downplayed the situation of the oil leak? Similarly, we tend to downplay how bad or how hard a relationship may be. That is because we usually have love for these people and love does cover a multitude of sins.

2. **If toxins are being released, cap the source immediately.**

Do you remember those underwater pictures of the oil leak and the attempts to cap it? Well again, if we are in a relationship with someone who is abusive we need to resist that behaviour asap.

3. **Put appropriate boundaries in place to contain the toxic person.**

Just like BP brought in floats to contain the oil spill we too need to erect boundaries to prevent the toxic person from harming us.

4. **If you are having difficulties stopping the behaviour then call in the professionals.**

Often victims of toxic relationships are so weakened that they need the help of a good counselor to help them think clearly. If you suspect you are in a toxic relationship seek out help immediately. We can help you with that.

Well, those are just some common sense suggestions. Let me share some concepts that are Biblical in nature, because that is where true wisdom can be found.

Biblical Wisdom on Relationships

1. **Choose your close relationships wisely.**

Many people can be sweet talked into a friendship only later to find out the person is toxic. Better not to even begin a relationship with someone who does not honour God in their life. This is the unequally yoked principle of 2 Corinthians 6:14-15

2 Corinthians 6:14-15 (The Message)

Don't become partners with those who reject God. How can you make a partnership out of right and wrong? That's not partnership; that's war. Is light best friends with dark? Does Christ go strolling with the Devil? Do trust and mistrust hold hands? Who would think of setting up pagan idols in God's holy Temple?

Does this mean that we run from a friendship with a person who is not a follower of Jesus? No, we want to be a good influence on other, but it does mean that we never take the relationship to a deep or committed level because of the difference in basic value systems. I was a youth pastor for 12 years, and every year I did a talk on sex and dating. And I spent a lot of time on this passage. Some of the kids in the youth group did what they called

“missionary dating”. They would date non-Christian people and then witness to them in hopes that they would change their ways and become followers of Jesus. Did it work?

[Chair Illustration]

What is the principle here? It is easier to pull someone down than pull someone up. If you don't want to end up in a toxic relationship, then be very discerning in who you get close to. Take a long time in dating before you get engaged.

The principle holds true in terms of business relationships. If someone is showing signs of difficult behaviour now, don't assume that you can change them. Better to not take that relationship to a deep level.

1. Run away from people with toxic behaviour.

People with toxic behaviours are often very sly and cunning. It is easy to be drawn in with their charisma and subtle pressure. But the moment we realize that something is not right we need to exit, get to a safe place and reassess the situation.

What is a good Bible example of this?

The OT character of Joseph.

Remember the story of how Joseph was put in charge of Potiphar's household. Little did he know that Potiphar's wife was a toxic person. Here is the story:

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house.

When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, she called her household servants. "Look," she said to them, "this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house." Genesis 39

Here is one toxic lady! Can you imagine what would have happened if Joseph stayed around and nurtured this relationship? Man that would have been bad news. She was a seductress, a manipulator and a liar. Joseph did the right thing didn't he? He saw this woman for who she was and ran in the other direction. Likewise cultivating a relationship with someone with questionable moral character is always deadly. Better to run than to get caught up in the web of toxicity with that type of person.

The Bible also speaks to this issue for women. 2 Timothy 3:1-7

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people.

They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. 2 Timothy 3:1-7

Now this does not mean that we don't try to help people who have difficult behaviour. We do have an obligation to help them and point them to the Lord. We need to minister to them. But in terms of deepening a relationship with them we need to be very careful. One way to handle people with toxic behaviour is to never get too close to them in the first place. There is a warning here for all of us.

More could be said but let me direct you to this next passage in Ephesians 4:25-26, 29-32, which illustrates this idea;

Follow God's advice for healthy relationships

In our consideration of toxic relationships we have been focusing on the toxicity of others and their effect on us. But what about our own toxins that we bring into our relationships? You know, sometimes human nature gets the better of us and we give in to the urge to give people a piece of our mind without holding back, much like Steve Martin in this video clip:

Video: Planes trains and automobiles

Have you ever brought that kind of toxicity into your relationships? Have you ever blasted or tried to manipulate with words and harmed people? I have. I know all too well my propensity to release poison into my relationships. My guess is we all struggle with this.

In contrast, look at what the Bible says:

What this adds up to, then, is this: no more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth. In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself. Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry-- but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry. Don't give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life. Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift. Don't grieve God. Don't break his heart. His Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life, making you fit for himself. Don't take such a gift for granted. Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ forgave you. Ephesians 4:25-26, 29-32 The Message

I could teach for an hour on this passage alone but let me walk through this passage and point out just a few obvious concepts.

General Observations

- **In relationships God desires truthfulness not pretense.**

The Bible says, *put off falsehood and speak truthfully*. Pretense is to be deceitful or to put on a façade. Pretense means pretending you are something that you are not. It is phoniness and hypocrisy. Truth, on the other hand, is what sets relationships free. Now remember, we will never regret telling the truth, but how we tell it and when we tell it is critically important. Pretense is a toxin that harms relationships. The Bible tells us to put off falsehood and to put on truthfulness. We need to watch for this in others and also ourselves.

- **Anger in relationships is OK as long as it is dealt with constructively and with immediacy.**

In all our relationships we will have anger issues. God says here: ***In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.*** It is normal to become angry at certain things, and it is even healthy at times. But unchecked anger is destructive.

Aristotle said: “Anybody can become angry - that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way - that is not easy.”

When we leave issues unresolved it gives evil a foothold in our lives. If you want evil to have a foothold in your life then get angry with your family and friends and refuse to deal with it. Keep putting it off. It will eventually kill your friendship and possibly even kill you. We need to watch for anger in others, check it in ourselves, and deal with it with immediacy.

- **We need to be so careful in what we say and how we say it.**

The Bible says here: ***Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.***

Say only words that invite people to live and never use words that cause people to want to crawl under a rock and die. No negativity, no criticism, no competition. As this passage says, “Say only what helps, each word a gift”. Perhaps you like me need to do a word audit. To examine how we talk and come across to people. Our words are like seeds or bullets. Seeds can grow into a beautiful flower. Bullets only kill. Are my words wholesome and encouraging or do they put people on edge?

Cutting remarks, what are they? They are words that sting and hurt a person. This could take the form of satire or subtle put downs or even direct hurtful statements. Last week at this party we were at I saw a guy I hadn’t seen in 10 years. Before even saying “Hi”. He patted my stomach and said “boy you sure have put on weight since the last time I saw you”. That hurt my feelings. I felt like saying, in the spirit of W.C. Fields, “well you are uglier than you were ten years ago but at least I can go on a diet”. The fellow basically stood there by himself for

the rest of the night. I wonder why? Who wants to hang out with a guy who can only make cutting remarks?

God asks us to avoid any irreverent or disrespectful labels we put on people. Idiot, jerk, stupid, fool, moron. Profanity isn't just limited to foul swear words. Subtler ones apply too. But to be practical God gives us more specifics in this passage:

- **Eliminate the negative**

God mentions several things here to guard against in our relationships: ***Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.***

Question: What are some synonyms or words to describe these terms?

Bitterness: Resentment, sullenness, animosity, sourness...

Rage: fury, wrath, fume, seethe, boil with rage

Anger: annoyance, irritation, antagonism

Brawling: Fight, scrap, clash

Slander: Insults, maligning, slur, slight. It refers to bad-mouthing or any kind of spitefulness. There are few things worse than people slandering you behind your back. That will kill any kind of friendship quickly.

Malice: hatred, spite, meanness, nasty, cruelty

Now notice in this passage God says to "make a clean break" from these things – get rid of these things in relationships. What does this imply? Two things: It means we need to be on guard against these qualities in people with whom we have close relationships. But it also means we are to be ruthless in examining our own relational behaviour and aggressively cut off any tendencies toward cutting remarks, backbiting or profane talk. These are poisons that destroy relationships. And if we are not walking closely with God and experiencing his transformation in our lives, we can contaminate others in or lives with these kinds of toxins. None of us want to do that.

In contrast, this passage from the Bible tells us to:

- **Embrace the positive: kindness, compassion and forgiveness.**

God says, ***Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.***

Isn't this the way you want to be treated by your friends? Of course! Good relationships are characterized by gentleness, sensitivity and forgiveness.

What is kindness? It means to treat those we are close to with a sense of calmness and sensitivity. It means to be tender with others and not tough. It means to have a soothing and peaceful influence on our friends rather than being irritating or causing conflict.

What does it mean to be compassionate? It means to be sensitive and responsive to our friends and receptive to their thoughts and ideas. Being sensitive also means that we are to be aware of other's feelings, to be perceptive about what is going on in their minds and thoughts. Insensitivity is a toxin. Compassion is like a soothing ointment.

And finally, what does forgiveness mean? Essentially it means to give our friends grace and mercy when they blow it. Grace and mercy are two sides of the forgiveness coin. Grace means giving them a response in word and action that they don't really deserve. Mercy means not giving our friends what they do deserve. Forgiveness is the oil that helps friendships run smoothly.

You see, nurturing our friendships God's way is not only rewarding for us in our friendships but it also has a direct bearing on our personal relationship with God. Look again at what this passage says about releasing toxins into our friendships:

- **When we release toxins into our relationships it breaks God's heart and hinders the work of God's spirit in our own lives.**

The Bible says "***Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God***".

The Message Paraphrase translates this passage this way, ***Don't grieve God. Don't break his heart. His Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life, making you fit for himself. Don't take such a gift for granted.*** How you treat my children has a direct bearing on the quality of my relationship with you. You treat my family with toxicity you will grieve my heart. You treat my family with tenderness I will love you for it! God is watching us in our relationships. Each of us is God's child and he wants us to treat each other with TLC, because each of us is so precious in his sight.

Maybe it would be good to conduct

A relationship audit

Are we getting close to a toxic relationship and we need to run? Are we in a toxic relationship and we need to seek help? Are we ourselves releasing toxins into our relationships or are we following God's relational priorities?

Bruce the shark was learning that fish are friends, not food. We would be wise to learn the same about those with whom we are in relationship.