

**Series: WHEN YOU JUST CAN'T LET IT GO—May 6, 2007**

**FORGIVENESS...AND FIXING BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS**  
**Matthew 18:15-17**

**I. INTRO**

A. My Dad told us that when he was about 12 or 13, he fell ice-skating and cut his leg. Like most kids, he didn't think a whole lot about it—and it healed over. Not long after that, his whole leg broke out in sores. Apparently, even though the cut healed over, the infection went into the bone, called osteomyelitis. As you know, this is extremely painful—and can be deadly. Doctors wanted to amputate his leg, but my grandmother refused.  
 -Poison from that infection went into his organs and damaged his heart. He was in grade 7 at the time, and had to repeat the entire year because he missed so much school. All from a little cut that never got cleaned out right.

B. I have watched the exact same thing happen in relationships over the years. Little cuts and wounds that really could be cleaned up quite easily—aren't. And they turn into raging relational infections where the poison spreads and kills. And relationships die unnecessary, stupid deaths. Friendships, marriages, siblings, parent-child relationships—death by infection.

1. Anyone here who's every had a relationship go bad—and it **still** hurts? I have too. The tragedy is that most relationships that head south...or go bad...could have been saved.

-Our **specific** problem is that we make snarky, rude comments—we slight people. Hurt them. And then we wall-paper right over this stuff and think time heals.

-Like my Dad's skinny 12 year old leg, the surface may heal, but the infection and poison goes way deeper. And then a bandage and antibiotic ointment won't even touch the infection. It goes to the bone—and unless something's done, the relationship will die of infection.

2. Jesus, Son of God, most relationally brilliant person who ever lived--told us how to fix broken relationships. And it really boils down to whether or not we have the courage, the depth, and the humility to actually do what He said.

-What I'm going to be talking about this morning is scary, messy stuff. It's the area where I personally struggle most—and yet it's what we need most to do.

3. As we talk this morning, I want you to think of your dream for your relational world. What kind of relational world would you like to live in? Probably one that's safe; that's filled with love and peace. And one that stays strong until you pass from this planet. And long after you're gone, remembers what it was like to have a friend like you.

-That is within reach for every person here. But it won't **just happen**. You'll have to learn to do what Jesus says. And I pray you will.

**III. CONFLICT AND RELATIONAL BRILLIANCE**

A. How we love and treat others has a huge impact on our relational world. Jesus said, "If you want to boil relational intelligence down to one sentence—here it is: Love and treat others the way **you** would like to be loved and treated!"

1. Love doesn't treat others as if their needs and feelings are unimportant. Love doesn't collect wrongs like baseball cards. Love is willing to overlook slights and

minor dings. Loves doesn't use people. Now, this is a **huge** issue—a series of messages all in itself. But Jesus isn't telling us to do this—just so we have some cool friends who think we're great; he's saying that others **deserve** to be treated like this.

2. The one thing the Bible works on **over and over and OVER** again in humility. Something everyone struggles with. Humility. The Bible doesn't say, "Ask God for humility." It says, "Humble yourself before God—don't force Him to humble you!" Paul, an early leader in the church—who used to be incredibly arrogant in his B.C. days, speaks to this issue:

**Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose. Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had (Philippians 2:1-5 NLT).**

-This passage then goes on to talk about how Jesus Christ humbled himself to step into our shoes and die at our hands. **That's** what His attitude is like!

3. Our goal is to love as Jesus loves, to forgive as Jesus forgives, to value relationships the way Jesus does—and to be willing to offer reconciliation the way He does. That's **hard stuff!** But the pay-off is bigger than any lottery win or business deal!

- B. The second thing we need to watch for when it comes to solving relational issues is to make sure that they're problems—not differences in style, personality and culture. I was reading recently that in the Inuit culture in northern Canada, when an Inuit is on a trip and runs out of provisions—he or she is free to go into anyone's dwelling and help themselves. It's expected. If you or I do that it's called breaking and entering. Cultures can be very different. So can personalities!

1. Here's my point. In our relational world, we have to be **really** careful to not to cultivate an over-sensitive relational immune system. You know, where every little perceived slight or comment or lack of phone call turns into a virus that makes us sick. Then we start complaining, gossiping, giving the silent treatment—and doing other childish things.

2. One of the things I'm guilty of is reading into things—body language, comments, lack of comment—I've found that I can read into almost **anything** and start building my case. A lot of relational junk comes from low self-esteem, or selfishness or jealousy. When we give into this stuff, we become **high maintenance friends**. Anyone know what I'm talking about? Where you're always worrying about how they're going to react, or whether you said the right thing, or coddled their fragile ego. The relationship just gets to be too much work, cause it's on life-support!

-Here's my point. Jesus instructions on forgiveness and reconciliation are intended as strong medicine for broken relationships—not as a remedy for our thin skin and fragile egos!

- C. The most explicit instructions on how to reconcile, how to fix a broken relationship are found in Matt. 18. Jesus has been talking about **forgiveness**. Let's read what He says—and then we'll walk through it.

**“If a brother or sister sins, go and point out the fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. (Matthew 18:15-16NLT)”**

1. This is actually very simple. Three steps. Go to the person, go for help, go to the church. The first step, the one we will spend the most time on says, if there's conflict between you and someone--**go directly to the person. Go in private. Go for the purpose of reconciliation.**
  - a. **The first step is acknowledging the conflict.** How many of you grew up in families where conflict was dealt with like the gunfight at the OK Corral—lots of blood. Sometimes the *sheriff* died?
  - b. How many of you grew up in families who pretended nothing was wrong. “Conflict? What conflict?” “What’s wrong?” “Nothing!” Well, the truth is, to **live** is to be in conflict—and sometimes what we learn in our families in **how** to deal with it cripples us relationally. Truth is, if you shoot people, you lose friends. You stuff it, and it’ll blow up someday and kill you and others. We need to courage to **admit** conflict—and then deal with it in constructive, not destructive ways.  
-Think about this question for a few minutes: **Where in my life am I in conflict with someone?**
  - c. And the specific issue Jesus raises is, “Did they **sin** against you.” Remember what I said about being thin-skinned? Reading into things? Simple disagreements? Did they **sin? How** did they sin? Sin should be a violation of what the Bible says—or a violation of an understanding you had with them. Ask, **Can I just let it go—and let my love cover it?** Maybe you need to chill out; or examine your own heart.
2. If something sticks in you—has a kind of root system to it--then you need to talk about it. Jesus tells us to **take the initiative. "YOU go..."** Why? Well, because we **all** know that the other person is **too** proud, **too** pig-headed to do anything about it! Actually, they may not even **know** there's a problem. Jesus makes it clear that unity is so important and bitterness so dangerous that we **need to deal with it right away.** Paul says, “Don’t let the sun go down on it!”  
  
-Know what we tend to do? Pout...and wait. In his book, **What's So Amazing About Grace**, Philip Yancey tells the story of a an old man who spends the last **decades** of his marriage sleeping down the hall from his wife because of a stupid conflict they’d had 30 years before. So, every night this guy waits to hear his wife’s footsteps on the hall—and she waits for his! And the stalemate lasts **30 years.**
3. The third thing we have to do is summarized in the word, **go.** We have to **approach, don’t avoid** the person we are in conflict with.
  - a. Let me tell you the embarrassing truth about me. **I don't want to go!** I can find a thousand excuses not to make the call, not to make the trip. I'd rather just be mad; let **them** make the next move. Know why? **Fear.** You've felt it, haven't you? The night before you plan to approach someone, you have trouble getting to sleep. You awake with this sick feeling in your stomach. You're popping Roloids and Immodium AD.

- Sometimes we **should** be afraid. Some people are **already** so crabby and unpredictable, the thought of lighting their fuse is not a pretty picture. And honestly, sometimes it gets messy.
- b. Sometimes we procrastinate because we think we have to have the perfect presentation. We're afraid our chin might quiver, we might blink, back-down, or blow up. The truth is that we just need to go--right away--without waiting until we can do it flawlessly.
  - c. How many of you think what Jesus says here is complicated? And yet a lot of people who **know** and believe Jesus is telling the truth **totally** ignore what He says. People send anonymous letters, leave unidentified phone messages—or send emails with fangs. That's like a little kid throwing a handful of rocks and running away. Jesus says, "Don't be a gutless wonder! **Don't wimp out!** If you have a problem, look the person in the eye and **talk** to them. If you can't do that—drop it!
4. The fourth piece of advice Jesus includes in here is brilliant--but totally counter-intuitive. It is by far His **least** followed command. Six words: "just between the two of you." Know what it means in the original Greek? **Just between the two of you! No third parties.** Don't talk to anyone else first. Go straight to the person you have the problem with.
- a. How many of you would say that your very **first** instinct is to go and talk privately with the person who offended you? That's usually the **last** person I feel like talking to. I want to go and find a bunch of friends to talk to. See, I want **sympathy**. I want **support**. I want a **posse!**
  - b. But when we bias our friends, we're simply manipulating public opinion in our favor—and we don't even know if we're **seeing** things correctly.
  - c. One of the most powerful, convincing things you can say to a person you're trying to clear the air with is, "I have come straight to you! I haven't talked to **anyone** else about this." Here's the deal; if you keep it contained, then if you're wrong you have nothing to prove to your friends. You can let it go.
  - d. This **between the two of us** principle has huge implications for those of us who have friends who want to back their garbage truck up to our door. Ever have someone do that? **Beep! beep! beep!** What if we became people who graciously stopped them and encouraged them to go **directly** to the person that had a problem with? That would be **huge!**
5. There's another principle--a fifth principle you can find here in this advice Jesus gives, and that is to **approach them sensitively**. **How** you approach someone will make the difference between whether you get the problem solved, or simply escalate the war. John Maxwell says we all approach conflict with a bucket of water in one hand and a bucket of gas in the other. When we're done, everyone will know which one we threw.
- One author I read defined **sensitivity** as **assuming our own fallibility**. Say, "I'm assuming I'm wrong on this or that I've missed something, but I need to get your input." See, what you're doing is leaving the back door open--you might need it if you've totally misread the situation.
6. The sixth principle is almost a no-brainer in light of the others. You simply **discuss the problem with them**. Jesus uses the word **show** which literally means to *shed light, clarify things*. You simply tell the person your perception of what has happened, how it makes you feel, and how it is affecting the relationship.

- a. This is probably the most difficult part, and in my research I came across some great suggestions.
- \*First, **pray**. God's interested—and He can give you the **understanding and grace** you need!
  - \*Second, **use verbal discipline**. You may want to write out what you're going to say beforehand. Proverbs says, **A gentle answer turns away wrath**. Simply put—be careful! Don't overstate your case and don't understate it.
  - \*Third, **make sure you clearly understand what the other person is saying**. Repeat it. Say, "Do I understand you as saying..." Have I understood you?"
  - \*Finally, if you are in conflict, **narrow the issue to the core** of what you're in conflict about.
- b. Now, sometimes when you come out on the other end of a conversation, you have to simply agree to disagree. **It's okay to do that!** You and I don't have to be right or omniscient. However, if you go into a conversation **determined** to win, to see someone humbled or to draw blood--you've already sabotaged your chances for a good solution.
7. The seventh principle is may be the most important. Jesus says it like this; **If they listen to you, you have won them over**. Let me summarize it with three words: **Aim at reconciliation**. The goal is not to **win**, but to **win them over--reconcile**.
- a. About a year ago, I was running up Wooten Way, a street close to where I live. I was running along the road to save my ankles—also, because I didn't feel like crossing the street.
- Anyway, a woman came driving towards me and had to slow down and swerve to miss me. As she slowed down, I could tell that she had a message for me. Her fist was moving, and so was her mouth. I'm not real good at reading lips, but I think the message may have gone something like this, "Get off the road, ..." Now, I can't be sure, but I **think** she may have been calling me a name. I'm not going to repeat the name--but it would be a part of my anatomy just south of the equator and in the western hemisphere.
- b. Now, this woman followed the first six guidelines of confrontation very well.
- 1) She acknowledged the conflict she had with my choice of places to run.
  - 2) And she took the initiative in speaking to me about it.
  - 3) She didn't avoid the problem--she acknowledged it.
  - And, 4) to her credit, she didn't involve any third parties--she came **directly** to me on the issue. And, 5) while being sensitive enough to keep the windows up, she approached me alone. And she, 6) certainly discussed her issue with great clarity.
- But did her confrontation fulfill what Jesus had in mind? No. See, she missed the seventh principle. The goal wasn't reconciliation. After dumping her load, throwing her rocks, she drove off into the sunset.
- Here's the deal. If what you're doing is **not** about finding ways to solve the problem and fix the relationship--then you will totally cancel out the other six principles. The goal of confrontation is **always** reconciliation--to **win the other person back**.

8. Jesus is very realistic about this process. He **knows** stuff like this doesn't always have a "happily ever after" ending to it. Sometimes things get worse. Jesus says, "If this doesn't work, even after several tries—**just between the two of you**—you may need to get help.
- a. The first step is to involve another person to serve as a mediator and help you both get reconciled. Now, the point is not to bring in your posse of friends to help you gang up on the other person. You find someone you mutually respect and ask them to help you work it out--with the agreement that you will listen to what they say and make the changes necessary.
  - b. The second step, if there **still** is no reconciliation, is to get into a more formal process which may involve church leaders or a grievance team of some kind.  
-And then Jesus says something astounding. "Sometimes you just have to let it go. Sometimes you do everything you can--you follow all the steps, try to involve others--but the relationship is in cardiac arrest. Sometimes there just has to be distance between you and that person, with the hope that someday there can be reconciliation.
9. Now, let me speak to you as your pastor. At The Olive Branch, **this** is how we will do things. We have to align ourselves with Jesus. We believe that relationships are extremely important; we will treat people with love, care and respect, and we will be straightforward, honest and transparent. This is how Jesus said it should be—and doing what He says is **always** the relationally intelligent thing to do—and leads to wholeness!
- a. Friends, we call ourselves The Olive Branch for a reason. We want to be about peace and unity. And if someone takes an issue underground and starts griping, complaining, and creating misunderstanding and dissension behind the scenes, we take that very seriously. Jesus did; we have to!  
-At The Olive Branch, if there's an issue, we will talk about it—deal with it openly. We will not take it to a dozen friends, we will ask questions, gain understanding--we will **protect** the unity of the Spirit.
  - b. Something else. If you disagree with something that happens here, please don't sent anonymous notes or spread it to all your friends. That's the chicken's way out. Do what Jesus said; **approach** whoever's responsible directly. Don't accuse—dialogue!
  - c. Something else. Sometimes people we know and love get stuck in relational conflict. I think part of our calling is to lovingly urge them—and help them, if necessary, to work things out.
  - d. Another suggestion. God's overall approach to humans is **GRACE**. Amazing grace. In defining love in the book of 1 Cor. 13, Paul says, **think the best of others--not the worst**. We all love Jesus, we're all trying to fulfill His mission and bring his love and leadership to as many as possible, but **we will all make mistakes in the process**. So, at The Olive Branch, let's be **BIG-HEARTED people, okay?**
  - e. Finally, if you've come from another church where you were in conflict with the people or leaders there, I would to urge you to follow these biblical guidelines. Go to the people there; if there's a mess, help clean it up. See, if you don't, you may drag the bitterness and hurt—not just into The Olive Branch—but wherever you go. Life's too short for that. Are we agreed?

### III. YOUR BEST RELATIONAL TOOL

A. For a few moments as we close, I want to talk about the best tool in your collection for making your relational world whole—and growing. Very simply, it's the ability to sincerely apologize.

-There was this sappy movie back in the 70's that made a phrase quite famous. The phrase was, ***Love means never... [having to say you're sorry.*** And the movie was... ***Love Story.***

-That has to be the stupidest line I've ever heard! The truth is, ***Love means HAVING to say your sorry!*** If you're too arrogant or too uptight or too worried about your self esteem to admit you're wrong, say you're sorry and ask forgiveness, that will kill others respect for you. People admire others who have the guts to admit their mistakes, apologize, and make things right!

-You can ***forgive*** someone who never apologizes to you, but you can't reconcile and rebuild trust unless they do. The inability or unwillingness to apologize and make things right may be the single biggest killer of relationships in the world. A genuine apology from us opens the door to being forgiven and reconciled—and ultimately healing the relationship.

-Write this down somewhere. ***Relationally intelligent people know HOW to apologize and do it regularly!***

-Write this one down too. ***Good relationships are ALWAYS marked by a willingness to apologize, forgive and reconcile.***

1. I want you to think about the ***main*** relationships in your life right now. Think about each person. When was the ***last*** time you apologized to them? Not, when did you do something nice to make up for something you said; or when did you buy them flowers, or give them privileges—when did you ***look them in the eye, own what you did, say you were sorry, and ask them to forgive you?***

-Has it been a while since you've done that? Maybe never? Why not? Is it because you're such a wonderful person that you never screw up? Is it because they screw up so much ***more*** than you, you figure they had it coming to even the score? Hear me on this one—learning to apologize well may be the best gift you ever give to yourself and others. When you apologize, your world expands, you clear your heart and your conscience; when you choke, when you don't, your world gets smaller. It's that simple.

2. Sometimes the specific issue is that we just never learn how to apologize. Gary Chapman has written several books on the ***Five Love Languages.*** His point is that each of us has a different love language—and if no one around us speaks it, we may feel unloved. He has written a new book with Jennifer Thomas, a counselor, entitled ***The Five Languages of Apology.*** It's a book about learning to apologize—and it makes a fascinating point: Sometimes we apologize, but others don't ***hear*** it because it sounds insincere. It's ***missing*** something.

-So, potentially, there could be two friends who are totally sideways with each other--one thinking he's apologized, the other feeling that he hasn't. You can imagine the resentment that could build on both sides—and how messy it could get. What is it that makes an apology seem sincere?

-Let me simply list, right from the book, the components—or ***languages***—of apology that most people are looking for—in fact, that God looks for when we apologize to Him!

- a. The first part of any sincere apology is expressing genuine **regret**. I'm sorry. When we apologize to God, we admit our guilt and our shame for the disappointment we've caused and the damage we've done.  
 -If you've done something that's caused pain or embarrassment or inconvenience or betrayed someone's trust—they need to know that you can **feel** their pain.  
 -Know what almost immediately cancels sincerity in **any** apology? When people say, "I'm sorry...**but!**" This is usually followed by an accusation of how the other person provoked you. That's not an apology—that's an excuse.  
 -One other tip. Saying you're sorry should never be a tool to then get someone to apologize to **you**. Don't manipulate.
- b. Something else; when we sincerely apologize, we **accept responsibility for what we've done**. At the heart of that are the words, **I was wrong**. Hard words to say. Let's try them together: **I WAS WRONG!**  
 -God asks us to use a very unpopular word to describe what we do that offends him, hurts us, and hurts others. **Sin**. The Bible says, "If we say we haven't sinned, we're lying! Living in denial! It's when we own our sin—call it what God calls it—that we can be forgiven and feel forgiven!"
- c. The third component of an apology is genuinely **repenting**. The word "repent" when it's used in the Bible means to change your mind; to change how you act; to do a 180. When we apologize, it's important to say, "I will do my best to make sure that this **never** happens again!"  
 -If you have chronic problems with alcohol, affairs, pornography, anger, or lying—then sincerely repenting will mean that you take action, get help so that your apology is believable.
- d. A fourth component of an apology is simply asking the person you've hurt if they will forgive you. See, when you ask someone to actually forgive you, you're letting them know that you want the relationship between you cleared; restored. Asking forgiveness also shows that you know you've done something wrong, and you're putting the future of your relationship in the hands of the person you've offended.
- e. A fifth component of a sincere apology is **making things right**. If you borrow someone's car and wreck it, say, "I'm really sorry. I know you paid a lot of money for this, and I will never borrow your car again. Will you forgive me, please?"—but never **fix** the car or pay for it, what does that say? Something's missing!  
 -You've heard the saying, **Words are cheap!** It's true. Sometimes you need to ask, "What can I do to clear things up and make this right?" And then do it!
- B. We **crave** relationships, don't we? Our relational world is a **huge** part of life! Anyone here ever hurt someone you care about? Doesn't it feel like you're carrying a 5 gallon can of guilt on your back? It wears us out, slows us down. A **sincere apology** could end a **lot** of pain.  
 -So—**why don't we do it?** I read recently of the death of a New England Patriots football player by the name of Darryl Stingley. He took a hit from Oakland Raider Jack Tatum during an exhibition game in 1978 that broke his neck and put him in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Tatum, the guy who hit him, bragged, "my best hits border on the

felonious!”—and wrote books, calling himself the **NFL Assassin**. And he **never apologized** to Darryl!

-Why not? Why do people sometimes throw away friendships and marriages rather than apologize? **Why?**

1. Well, some people don't know how. Some are afraid—of rejection; of things getting out of control; of getting sued; of admitting that they've failed. Some have never seen it modeled—seen people apologize with dignity and grace.

2. But I am convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that the main issue is really **pride**. And God hates pride. Pride started the whole rebellion against God—and this world **writhes** in agony because of our pride. Pride breaks relationships, creates wars, kills marriages—and pride keeps us from what we actually want most. Love. Reconciliation. Warmth. And **peace**.

-It could be that, if you were honest this morning, you'd have to admit that pride has **always** been the issue with you—and you've left a trail of blood and broken relationships. So--will you give it up? For Christ's sake, for **your** sake—would you give it up?

#### IV. HAVE YOU EVER APOLOGIZED TO GOD?

- A. I just want to be clear about something. All the information in the world won't help you and I have the courage to straighten out our relationships. It's hard work—sometimes messy. Humbling myself? Honestly owning what I've done? Telling someone I'll do better when I honestly don't know if I can? Taking the initiative to go to someone who's wronged me? Choosing to forgive; to stop acting selfishly and childishly and arrogantly? These are some of the **hardest** things in life!
- B. And that's why we come to Jesus! But you can't come here and pretend your relationship with Him is cool—if you've never apologized and reconciled where you need to. You can't come to this table representing oneness, when you're in a major snit with someone else. And mostly, you can't come to a bloody cross where Jesus died in shame for my sin and yours—and hold onto your pride. You can, however, make things right here and leave your pride here...and ask Jesus to heal your brokenness. Jesus is calling. Will you just come?