

“What Destroys and What Builds Relationships?”

Proverbs 15:1-5; Ephesians 4:25-32



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Well good morning everybody! We're continuing our series on '40 Days of Community,' which is all about deepening our relationships within our church family, and reaching out in love to the community around us. We're engaged in both of these things because we're better together. After God created the first human God said, "It's not good for the man to be alone." One of the reasons why people are so alone is because they are cut off from others. But we're wired for relationships. We're made to go through life together. That's particularly true if you are a Christian. There are no Lone Ranger Christians. Paul reminds his friends in Rome: "Christ makes us one body and individuals who are connected to each other." Will you circle that word 'connected'? God wants us to be connected to one another but here's the problem: It's easy for us to get disconnected from each other. It's like an appliance that is plugged into a wall in your living room but the cord is strung completely across the room. You keep tripping over it and it becomes unplugged. So, today we're going to look at what causes this disconnect. Why do relationships fall apart? How can you keep that from happening?

Now that many of you have met with your small group a few times you've probably discovered you're not all alike; you don't all think alike or look alike. Let me give you a little secret. God could have made us all alike. God could have made us all with the same opinions, the same personalities, the same interests, but God loves variety. And one of the purposes of small groups is to teach us relational skills. It's the laboratory for learning how to get along with each other. And the skills that you learn in your group can be applied to every aspect of your life. It's the lab for learning how to relate to each other.

You see, unfortunately we're not taught how to form healthy relationships. Chances are that you never took a class in school on how to have good communication and healthy, positive relationships, and yet that's the most important thing in life: having good relationships with others. Your parents may not have ever had that kind of training and so it's likely they were not able to pass along this kind of wisdom to you saying, "Here are the secrets, the building blocks and keys to good relationships; and here are the things that destroy them." I've talked to so many people who've gone through a difficult divorce, who have no idea what a healthy relationship looks like. They're clueless and ask, "Why did this happen to me? How could I have prevented this?"

Now while Patty and I both have extensive training and experience in counseling and psychology, you don't need advanced degrees to learn this stuff. Most relational prob-

lems come down to one of four negative attitudes. They are the enemies of community: Number one is a no-brainer: Selfishness.

SELFISHNESS destroys relationships. It is the number one cause of conflict, the number one cause of arguments, the number one cause of divorce, and the number one cause of war. James 4 verses 1 and 2 say this, "What causes fights and quarrels, don't they come from your desires that battle within you. You want something but you don't get it." It's very easy for this little spoil-sport to creep into a relationship. When you start a new relationship you work real hard at being unselfish and giving. You go out on your first date and say, "Oh here, please, you go first. Let me pay for that." You are very unselfish at the start of a relationship, but as time goes on, selfishness begins to creep in. It's just natural that we put more energy into building than into maintaining relationships.

Have you heard about the five stages of a married cold? During the first year of a marriage you say, "Honey darling, I'm worried about that sniffle. So I've called the paramedics to rush you to OHSU for a checkup and a week of rest. And I know you don't like hospital food, so I'm having gourmet meals brought in for you." That's the first year. Second year of a marriage: "Sweetheart, I don't like the sound of that cough. I've arranged for Dr. Wagner to make a house call. Let me tuck you in bed." Third year of a marriage: "You look like you've got a fever. Why don't you drive yourself over to the Emergency Care, get some medicine, I'll watch the kids." You know, very magnanimous. Fourth year: "Look, be sensible. After you've fed and bathed the kids, washed the dishes, you really ought to go to bed."

Fifth year: "For Pete's sake, do you have to cough so loud? I can't hear the TV. Would you mind going in the other room while this show is on? You sound like a barking dog." What happens to us over time? We just stop making the effort, don't we? Isn't that the simple truth?

It's easy to slide into selfishness. A counselor friend of mine says, "If there was more courting in marriage, there would be fewer marriages in court." Now we all know that selfishness destroys a relationship. So why don't we change, or better yet, why can't we change? Why can't we be more unselfish? Well there are a couple of reasons. First, it is human nature to be selfish. I don't think about you most of the time. I think about me, my needs, my interests, my hurts. How is my life going? What is affecting me? And you don't think about me most of the time, you think about yourself more than anybody else. You think about yourself all the time. It is natural to be selfish. When a baby's born, the whole world revolves around 'Me and mine.' Infants don't give anything back. What you mistake for a smile is just gas. They are totally selfish creatures. And a lot of us act like we're still infants.

We are naturally selfish, but second, everything in our culture reinforces and feeds on our self-centeredness. Every advertisement that comes out caters to our self-centeredness. "You deserve it. Have it your way, Obey your thirst." Think about that last slogan. That says: Go after whatever you desire. Forget about if it hurts anybody. If it feels good just do it. You're just an animal. So obey your urge. Obey your thirst. Live for yourself regardless of how it affects everybody else. But these kinds of messages can't build relationships. You can't have a partnership. You can't have teamwork if you're selfish. The Indianapolis Colts would never have won last week's Superbowl if the players decided they were just going to look out for themselves and not band together. The wisdom literature of the Old Testaments says, "Selfishness only causes trouble." (Proverbs 28:25). It only causes trouble.

So if selfishness destroys relationships, then **SELFLESSNESS** builds them. Selflessness builds relationships. What selflessness means is "a little bit less of me, and a little bit more of you." It means I think a little bit less about myself, and I think a little bit more of you. That is being selfless. I'm not the center of the universe. There are other people in this world besides me. Philippians 2:4 says this, "Look out for one another's interest, not just your own." That's selflessness.

Selflessness not only transforms a relationship, it also transforms the other person. I've seen it happen many, many, times. You start acting selfless toward someone, giving them what they need, not what they deserve, and it transforms them into better people. You can see a good example of this in the movie *As Good As It Gets*. Jack Nicholson is just this irascible curmudgeon and nobody likes him. He's got all kinds of compulsions and hang-ups, and he is just cranky and mean all the time. But Helen Hunt shows him genuine love, genuine selflessness, and it transforms him. Watch this: (movie clip).

What is the best place for you to practice selflessness? 1) At home with your family; and 2) In your small group. Why? Because those are the people who are closest to you. It's very easy to be selfless in a crowd. Right now, nobody is demanding anything of you.

It's when you're in relationship with other people that you have to give and take of learning to get along with those who are different from you, that's where you have to learn to be selfless. And since so many of you are in small groups. Here is a little list of practical ways you can practice selflessness in your small group this week:

Number One: By showing up. I mean that, by showing up. You know, sometimes after I've worked all day and finally get home I don't feel like going out again. I want to just curl up on the couch; I don't want to do anything else. Even though I enjoy my small group once I get there, it's hard to get going. But after giving myself a little pep talk, after dinner I get myself over there. Now initially it is a selfless act. I know others want to see me and I will enjoy seeing them. So I put the needs of the group over my own personal desires. So just showing up is an act of selflessness.

Number Two: By accepting new people in my group. That's another way you can be unselfish: by not staying in my little group of friends. You know the phrase, "Us four, no more." You start to feel a little resentful when somebody says, "Hey, why don't we welcome some new folks into our small group? That statement is an act of selflessness. Another way to accept people is by really listening to them. Do you know that listening is one of the greatest gifts you can give others? Because you're giving them your time and attention. In our busy world it's far more valuable than money. You can always get more money but you only have a certain amount of time in life. So when you give somebody your ear, you are actually giving them a part of your life. And that is selfless. When you really listen to people and you're not thinking, "What am I going to say next?" You're not multitasking: planning the rest of your week, what you need to pick up at the store, wondering what the kids are doing. When you're actively listening, you try to draw out other people to talk. You say, "Well what do you think about that," or "How do you feel about that?" You don't dominate the conversation by doing all the talking; you want to hear what others have to say. That is practicing selflessness.

Paul says to the Galatians, "The person who plants selfishness, ignoring the needs of others and ignoring God, harvests a crop of weeds. All they'll have to show for it is a life of weeds. But the one who plants in response to God, letting God's spirit do the growth work in him, harvests a crop of real life and eternal life." Now, this is a very important truth because it has to do with the principle of sowing and reaping. What you sow, you're going to reap. If you plant criticism, people are likely to be critical of you. If you plant affirmation, people are going to affirm you. Whatever you sow in life, you're going to reap back. Selflessness is not something that happens overnight. You don't learn to be unselfish by being zapped. You plant one seed at a time and trust that over time you will reap a harvest, because selflessness is a growth process that requires careful attention.

Now here's the second thing that destroys relationships: **PRIDE** destroys relationships. The writer of Proverbs says, "Pride leads to arguments." Pride shows up in a lot of different ways: It shows up in criticism. If you are critical of other people, if you tend to be judgmental toward other people, if you tend to look down at other people, if you tend to be a picky, picky perfectionist — you have a pride problem. If you tend to be competitive and you're always comparing yourself to others, "Oh look at her dress, compared to my dress." Or, "Look at his car compared to my car." Or you're always comparing yourself to others...you know what? You have a pride problem. **Stubbornness** is closely related to pride. If you find it difficult to say, "I'm sorry;" if you choke on your apologies; if you can never admit when you're wrong—you have a pride problem. You say, "If I may have offended you." that's not an apology. It's like saying, "It's your fault for being offended." An apology is, "I was wrong. I'm sorry. Please forgive me." If you can't do that, you have a pride problem.

Now what does pride look like in a small group, since many of us are in small groups? How about when you always have to tell a story that tops the last story? "You did that? Well, listen to what happened to me." It surfaces when you are always offering advice and you never asking for any. When you never admit when you've had a tough week, everybody else is saying, "Yeah I've had a tough week." And you never admit to any problems or struggles in your life. Pride can be very self-deceptive. Everybody else can see it in you except you. You're blind to it. That's why we need honest feedback from others. The writer of Proverbs says, "Pride will destroy a person. A proud attitude leads to ruin." Another version paraphrases it this way: *First pride then the crash, the bigger the ego, the harder the fall.* Pride not only destroys relationships; it destroys you.

So what's the antidote? Pride destroys relationships. **HUMILITY** builds relationships. Listen to these five things that build relationships that come from First Peter, "Live in harmony. Be sympathetic. Love each other. Have compassion, and be humble." Those five really are built on the fifth one, the ability to be humble. Notice the link between being

humble and Paul's first word, "harmony." He's saying God doesn't want unison where we're all doing exactly the same thing. God wants harmony which is about being different but blending together. Differences are often the things that draw us together in the first place. Different notes and sounds make a great piece of music. Basses, altos, tenors, and sopranos blend together. Harmony is great; but to harmonize you need to practice humility. They go together.

In a symphony, if you have one flute player who always wants to stand and play louder than everybody else, it ruins the whole thing. If you have one person who says, "Notice me" it ruins the deepness, the richness, the harmony God wants us to enjoy. So how are you and I going to shift from being a prideful person to a more humble one?

Philippians offers us some great advice, "*Be humble and give more honor to others than to yourselves. Your attitude should be the same as that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God.*" No one has ever acted with more humility than Jesus. He was truly God but he gave up everything when he became one of us. He obeyed God and even died on a cross for us. And the more I come to know him; the more I want to be like him, more humble I become—and that builds relationships.

But there is a third struggle we all face, and that is the struggle of insecurity. INSECURITY destroys relationships. Again, here is why we call Proverbs the wisdom literature of the Bible. Listen to this passage: "*The fear of human opinion disables.*" When I'm so insecure that all I can do is wonder what you think of me, that's a disability. It really is. How so? When I'm afraid, I often try to control each other, and that can hurt a relationship. It's always easier to recognize that better in others than in ourselves. So watch this clip from *Finding Nemo* (movie clip). "I hate you." When people say that in a relationship, it is often a sign that somebody is trying to control somebody else. And what's beneath that control? Fear. Insecurity causes us to try to control others, and insecurity causes us to resist the control of others and that destroys relationships.

You know, it's an amazing dilemma that we human beings face. We long to be close, but we also fear being close. We want it, but we don't want it. We long to have intimacy with others, but we are also scared to death of being intimate with others. But you can't get close to somebody if there is fear in the relationship; if you're afraid someone is going to walk out on you. Commitment is about sticking it out regardless of whether we always get along or not. Commitment says, "We're going to make this thing work." Then the fear vanishes, and real intimacy has a chance to blossom.

So what do we fear in relationships? First, we fear exposure. We fear that someone is going to find out what we're really like, and we're afraid of exposure. So we hide our true selves; we don't want people to know what we're really like. We wear masks. We pretend to be people we're not. Fear makes us withhold the truth about ourselves and as a result it builds up walls. So nobody ever gets inside to know the real you. But there is a fear even deeper than that, and it is the fear of rejection. And this may be the greatest fear we carry: The fear of being rejected. We've all been rejected at some point, and we know how much that hurts. And so, we fear it and we close ourselves off and say, "I'll never let anybody hurt me again," and we build up walls. Maybe you have been rejected by somebody, a boyfriend, a girlfriend, an ex or somebody, a parent who said, "You're never going to amount to anything, or you're not good enough." Maybe you felt the sting of rejection by a teacher or a coach or someone you trusted. Or maybe you felt rejection in a church. Nobody reached out to you at a critical time in your life. And if that is the case, I would say to you, "I'm sorry." I mean, I am really sorry, and God grieved at your rejection.

In fact, if anybody understands rejection, it's Jesus Christ. Remember, even though he was innocent, they killed beat and killed him. That is the ultimate rejection. So God understands how you feel. But as your pastor, I would plead with you not to let that experience harden your heart. Don't build up a wall, or put yourself in a hardened shell. That's a self-imposed prison that you don't want to be in. And when you won't let anybody get close to you because "I'll never let anybody hurt me again," you're making a terrible mistake. You're not living. You're just existing. And it is my job as your pastor to say to you, "Take the risk. Have the courage to risk love again." Because if you will open up your life and you will lower the barriers, you will come alive again in a way you have never ever experienced. Ask God for the courage to take that risk again, to be open; to be vulnerable.

Insecurity destroys relationships, but what builds them? We all know the answer to this: Love. LOVE builds relationships. The writer of First John says "*Love has no fear because perfect love expels all fear. If we're afraid, it shows that His love has not been perfected in us.*" How does that work? How does love expel fear? Here's how: It takes the focus off of you, and it puts the focus on God and others. That's how it makes a difference. People ask me, "With all the public speaking you do, don't you ever get nervous talking in

front of people?" And the answer is, "Of course." In fact, when I was in seminary I was enrolled in a preaching class and one day we went over to a nearby church and took turns standing up in this big old pulpit talking a little about ourselves. And when my turn came I walked to the pulpit and just froze. All eyes were on me and not a word would come out of my mouth.

But do you know what has made the difference for me? Taking the focus off me and putting it on God and others. If I were to stand up here and think, "I wonder what people think about my haircut," I would have something to be afraid of, right? But I don't think about how I look. The minute I put on this robe, I start thinking about how much God loves each one of you, and about how much I have come to you each of you as well. You see, love has the power to throw your fear right out the window. Now you can't defeat fear and insecurity overnight. It doesn't happen for any of us that way, but you can take the first step right now. You can practice in your small group during these 40 Days of Community and get better at it.

Now the fourth and final enemy of community is resentment, and this one is the other big one. These four things destroy relationships. RESENTMENT destroys relationships. Job 5 verse 2 says this, "*To worry yourself to death with resentment is a foolish, senseless thing to do.*" Now everybody blows it. We all make mistakes. It's what the Bible calls "sin." I sin. You sin. The Pope sins. Everybody does. We are all sinners. That means "I'm not perfect. I don't bat 1000. I don't measure up to God's standard. I don't even measure up to my own standards. I disappoint myself a lot of the time."

So because we're all imperfect, we're going to hurt other people and other people are going to hurt us in life, intentionally and unintentionally. That's a fact. What's more important is what we do with that hurt? What you do with it is more important than the hurt. Are you going to allow it to make you bitter or are you going to allow it to make you better?

Now history and personal experience tell us that opposites *attract*, opposites attract and then when they get married, opposites *attack*. What fascinates you now will irritate you later. It's a fact of life and it happens all the time. When you are single and you look out there and you see somebody who is not like you; that is fascinating. You know, like a person who is kind of quiet says, "Look at that person, how boisterous! How loud! How full of life they are," and you find it attractive because it's not like you. And so you get in a relationship or you get married, and then after about a year, you're going, "Do you have to be so loud all the time?" And it starts getting on your nerves. It starts irritating you, and I now as I said you're trapped and then you attack.

I mean, if you have been married at any point in your life, how many of you had unrealistic expectations in your marriage? It's true. It's a setup for resentment. And often, it's not the big things in life that make us resentful. Those can obviously, and do. But it's also a lot of little things that just pile up, and you just start piling them up. And a lot of little things can break the camel's back. So we get irritated. And those irritations when we hold on to them turn into resentment. I wrote some common irritations in life to be looking out for in small groups. First is the person who is always late, and then they take 10 minutes to explain why they were late in the middle of the group; the person who talks too long, they love to hear themselves talk; the TMI, the too much information person, especially about a surgery of a relative. You know, it's an organ recital (you are awake!). The person who's dogmatic and says, "This is the way it is," and you say, "Well I guess the discussion just ended." The person who turns every statement into a wisecrack. They think they're a stand-up comedian and that the group is comedy club.

In every group, there is somebody who is just a little bit off. They don't catch all of the social signals. I call them the EGRs, the extra grace required. Right now, you're thinking of the person in the group right now. In fact, if you can't think of it, guess what? You're it. Okay? So if you don't know who it is in your group, it's you my friend because it's real obvious to everybody else.

Now what do you do when these little irritations surface in a small group? Well you do two or three things. First, you ask God to fill you with so much love that that irritation doesn't bug you anymore. Remember one of the things that a group does, it's not just to learn content, it's to learn to get along. It's to learn relational skills. That's why we believe everybody needs to be in a small group. You don't learn it on your own. You don't learn it sitting here in a crowd. You learn it in the laboratory of living.

Second, you can go to that person and talk to them personally. You know, in love, you say, "It just may be me, but I've noticed you're a real jerk." No, you don't say that. What do you say? "Maybe it's just me. Or maybe I'm a little extra sensitive but something you said or did bugs me, and I wonder if we can talk about it? Just the two of us." You see, what you don't do is to say nothing. What you don't do is sweep it under the carpet, hide

it, go home and complain about it to everybody else. Talk to everybody else in the group about it, but not that person. The reason you don't do that is because it quickly turns into resentment, and resentment is always destructive.

Now let me clarify something: I didn't say anger is always wrong. I said resentment is wrong. There is a right kind of anger. When I see injustice in the world, I'd better get angry. Our scriptures actually says, "Be angry but do not sin." In other words, there is a way to get angry and not sin. But resentment is frozen anger. It just piles up inside you. When you get resentful, you stop thinking clearly. Your logic gets distorted. Your perspective gets clouded and you don't think rationally when your emotions are involved. You just don't think straight. You start acting in self-defeating ways.

One of the purposes of a small group is to allow you to process your anger. You come to the group and you say, "You know what, I had this thing happen to me and I am so upset I just can't think straight." And the people in your group help you sort things through and keep you from doing dumb things. Paul says, "*Look after each other,*" that means 'watch out for each other,' "*Watch out that no bitterness,*" that's resentment, "*takes root among you, for as it springs up, it causes deep trouble hurting many in their spiritual lives.*" So when somebody is hurting in a group, you gather around them and you help them and you keep them from getting bitter against it. That's what helps heal relationships.

But do you want to know the real antidote to resentment? It's forgiveness. FORGIVENESS can build a relationship just like resentment will tear it down. And if you're going to have a marriage or a friendship that lasts your entire life, you're going to need massive doses of forgiveness, massive doses of forgiveness. Colossians 3:13, would you read this verse aloud with me?

"You must make allowances for each others' faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others."

Now, why should I forgive other people? Well, there are three reasons: First, resentment doesn't work, it only makes you miserable. And so holding onto a grudge, you're only hurting yourself with your anger. It doesn't help. So you forgive for your own benefit because resentment doesn't work, it just makes you upset. Second, you have been forgiven by God. And third, you're going to need more forgiveness in the future and so you better offer it to others.

Every Sunday we pray these words, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Think about what that means. "God, I ask you to forgive me for my mistakes and sins, and I ask you to help me forgive others their mistakes and sins. In other words, I cannot expect God to forgive me if I am not willing to forgive others. But what if I can't? That's why I need Christ in my life. Human love runs out. We need God's love to keep us going.

Now let me explain what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not making excuses; and so for that person who hurt you, they hurt you and it was real. Forgiveness is not minimizing the hurt. Forgiveness is not justifying it, saying it was no big deal. It was a big deal. Forgiveness is not saying it wasn't wrong. It was wrong. So what is forgiveness? Forgiveness is letting go of the pain and letting go of my right to get even.

Some of you are still allowing people from your past to hurt you in the present and that's dumb because they can't hurt you anymore. The past is past. And every time you hold onto that past, you are perpetuating your own pain. That person can only hurt you if you refuse to let it go of the hurt. Forgiveness is the only way to get on with your life. Do they deserve it? No. Do you deserve to be forgiven by God? No. But God did it anyway offering us the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

And God brought you here this morning because God's got some good news for you. Look at the next verse. Here's what God says to you, "*The Lord says forget what happened before, and don't think about the past. I'm going to do something new in your life, and I will make rivers on a dry land. I'm going to turn that desert into an oasis.*" You may have had some relational disasters in your life, welcome to the human race. Everybody has had some relational disasters. The question is: what are you going to do with them? God wants to start something totally new in your life today, right in the middle of '40 Days of Community' and it starts with opening up your life to Jesus Christ and letting him fill you with his love on a moment-by-moment basis.

Let's bow our heads: *Dear God, You've seen every relationship I've ever had, the good, the bad and the ugly. And you know how selfishness, and pride, and insecurity and resentment messes them up. I admit that I need your help, Jesus, in my life and in my relationships. So as much as I understand, I ask you Jesus to come into my life and live through me, and put your love through me. I want that fresh start that you offer. In your name I pray, Amen.*