LEARNING TO LOVE WELL
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A wise monk once said that "Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams." Loving well is the goal of the Christian life. This is easier in our dreams than in practice. It requires that we grow into emotional adulthood in Christ, the rewards of which are rich beyond measure. Many people know the truths of the Bible relatively well. They can recite most of the Ten Commandments and tell you key principles for Christian living. They believe wholeheartedly they should be living them. The problem is they so often don't!

We learn many skills to be competent in our careers and at school. We don't learn, however, the skills necessary to grow into an emotionally mature adult who loves well. The Bible is clear what we are to do. Part of growing into an emotionally mature Christian is learning how to practically apply the truths we believe.

For example:

- How can I be quick to hear and slow to speak?
- How can I be angry and not sin?
- How can I watch my heart above all else
- How can I speak the truth in love?
- How can I be a true peacemaker?
- How can I mourn?
- How can I not bear false witness against my neighbor?
- How can I get rid of all bitterness, rage, and envy?

When we don't walk out our beliefs our church and relationships within the church are not really any different from the world around us. Jesus preached great messages to the multitudes. Yet he knew that would not be enough for people to truly "get it." So he chose twelve disciples with whom he lived day and night for three years. He modeled how his teaching worked out practically. He had them practice. He supervised. He imparted power. Jesus knew inspiration was not enough. It is easy to grow physically older into an adult. It is quite another to grow into an emotional adult. Many people may be, chronologically, forty-five years old but remain emotionally immature.

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF PEOPLE

As emotionally mature Christian adults, we recognize that loving well is the essence of true spirituality. This requires that we experience connection with God, with ourselves, and with other people. God invites us to practice his presence in our daily lives. At the same time, he invites us "to practice the presence of people," within an awareness of his presence, in our daily relationships. The problem is that the two are rarely brought together. Jesus' contemplative prayer life with his Father resulted in a contemplative presence

with people. In the same way, out of our contemplative time with God, we, too, are invited to be prayerfully present to people.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day, the "church leaders" of that time, never made that connection. They were diligent, zealous, and absolutely committed to having God as Lord of their lives. They memorized the entire books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. They prayed five times a day. They tithed all their income and gave money to the poor. They evangelized. But they never delighted in people.

They did not link loving God with the need to be diligent, zealous, and absolutely committed to growing in their ability to love people. Jesus refused to separate the practice of the presence of God from the practice of the presence of people. He summarized the entire Bible for us:

"*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments*" **(Matthew 22:37–40).**

The problem is that we don't love people we treat them as objects. Something along the lines of...

- I walk in and dump my work on my secretary without saying hello.
- I move people around on an organizational chart at a staff meeting as if they were objects.
- I treat Mandy and our children as if they are not in charge of their own freedom, dreams, autonomy; I expect them to be the picture I have of them in my head.
- I am threatened when someone disagrees with my views.
- I listen to my neighbors' problems and help them with some errands hoping they will attend our church. They don't . . . and I move on to someone else.
- I get frustrated when people don't fit into my plans. The way I see things is "right." And if you don't see it as I do, you are not seeing things the "right" way. You are wrong. Recognizing the uniqueness and separateness of every other person on earth is so pivotal to emotional maturity. We so easily demand that people view the world the way we do. We believe our way is *the* right way.

True relationship can only exist between two people willing to connect across their differences. For this reason, when we love someone well as emotional adults, treating them as a person not an object, it is such a powerful experience. When genuine love is released in a relationship, God's presence is manifest. The separate space between us becomes sacred space.

WHAT ABOUT CONFLICT

Yet most Christians I meet are poor at resolving conflict. There are a few reasons for this:

IGNORING CONFLICT—FALSE PEACEMAKING

A tragically misinterpreted verse in the New Testament are Jesus' words:

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, because they will be called children of God" **(Matt. 5:9)**

Most people think that Jesus calls us in this verse to be pacifiers and appeasers who ensure that nobody gets upset. We are to keep the peace, ignoring difficult issues and problems, making sure things remain stable and serene. When, out of fear, we avoid conflict and appease people, we are false peacemakers.

For example: I sit in a meeting, and someone suggests something that I disagree with and feel goes against our values and vision. I want to keep the peace and make sure that everyone to be happy and comfortable because I am a pastor. If I do that, I am a false peacemaker. The problem with this scenario is that the way of true peace will never come through pretending what is wrong is right! True peacemakers love God, others, and themselves enough to disrupt false peace. Jesus models this for us.

EMBRACING CONFLICT—THE PATH TO TRUE PEACE

Conflict and trouble were central to the mission of Jesus. He disrupted the false peace all around him—in the lives of his disciples, the crowds, the religious leaders, the Romans, those buying and selling in the temple. He taught that true peacemaking disrupts false peace even in families:
"*Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household'* " **(Matthew 10:34–36).**

Why? You can't have the true peace of Christ's kingdom with lies and pretense. They must be exposed to the light and replaced with the truth. This is the mature, loving thing to do. Unresolved conflicts are one of the greatest tensions in Christians' lives today. Most of us hate them. We don't know what to do with them. Instead of risking any more broken relationships, we prefer to ignore the difficult issues and settle for a "false peace," hoping against hope they will somehow go away. They don't. And we all learn, sooner or later, that you can't build Christ's kingdom on lies and pretense. Only the truth will do. We cannot settle for 'False Peace'!

ADULT TO ADULT RELATIONSHIP - PROBLEM IS THAT WE ALL HAVE A PARENT, ADULT, AND CHILD ELEMENT TO OUR PERSONALITIES

Adult to Adult Relationships - A simplified way to view ourselves and how we behave, is to see within us three persons:

1. Parent Person 2. Adult Person 3. Child Person

PARENT

- The Parent Person: A composite of all emotionally significant people who serve as parent figures to the child.
- It is experienced inwardly as opinions, rules and compulsions etc.
- Outwardly, when we are operating from our Parent, we will come across with nurturing, critical or prejudicial behavior.

ADULT

The Adult Person: The organized & intelligent part

- Rational, Dispassionate , Responsible, "Referee"

CHILD

The Child Person: An inner world of feelings and experiences, especially in the form of responses to the Parent.

There are three parts to the Child Person:
1. The Natural Child. 2. The "Little Professor". 3. The Adaptive Child.

How this works

- Parent; Adult; Child.

SPEAKING AND LISTENING TO BE A TRUE PEACEMAKER

Many of us believe loving well is learned automatically, that it is just a "feeling." We underestimate the depth of our bad habits and what is needed to sustain long-term, Christlike change in our relationships.

Communication: **Verbal** = 7%;
Tone = 38%;
Non-verbal, facial expressions, attitudes, body posture, atmosphere & actions = 55%.

OBSTACLES TO BEING A GOOD LISTENER

- Boredom, Narrow-minded-ness i.e., we only hear what we want to hear, Defensiveness

HOW TO BE A GOOD LISTENER

- Put your own agenda on hold. Be quiet and still as you would before God, Listening is not thinking what you are going to say when the other person stops talking, Allow the other person to speak until he or she completes a thought. Reflect accurately the other person's words back to him or her.

WHEN SPEAKING AS A PEACEMEAKER:

Use "I" language, Use self-disclosure, Assume responsibility for statements, Avoid generalizations, Communicate feelings rather than issues

BILL OF RIGHTS

Respect is not a feeling. It is how we treat another person. Regardless of how we might feel about another human being, they are made in God's image and of infinite value and worth.

Respect means I give myself and others the right to:

- Space and privacy
- Be different
- Disagree
- Be heard
- Be taken seriously
- Be given the benefit of the doubt
- Be told the truth
- Be consulted
- Be imperfect and make mistakes
- Courteous and honorable treatment
- Be respected

ASSUMPTIONS

The ninth commandment reads:
"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor" **(Exodus 20:16).**

Checking out assumptions is a very simple, but powerful tool that eliminates untold numbers of conflicts in relationships. It enables me to check out whether what I'm thinking or feeling about you is true. It enables me to clarify potential misunderstandings. Every time I make an assumption about someone who has hurt or disappointed me without confirming it, I believe a lie about this person in my head. This assumption is a misrepresentation of reality. Because I have not checked it out with the other person, it is very possible I am believing something untrue. It is also likely I will pass that false assumption around to others.

EVALUATING EXPECTATIONS

Unmet and unclear expectations create havoc in our places of employment, classrooms, friendships, dating relationships, marriages, sports teams, families, and churches. We expect other people to know what we want before we say it (especially if they are invested in the relationship). The problem with most expectations is that they are:

- **unconscious**—we have expectations we're not even aware of until someone disappoints us;
- **unrealistic**—we may have illusions about others. For example, we think a spouse, a friend, or a pastor will be available at all times to meet our needs;
- **unspoken**—we may have never told our spouse, friend, or employee what we expect, yet we are angry when our expectations are not met; and

- **un-agreed upon**—we may have had our own thoughts about what was expected, but it was never agreed upon by the other person.

Expectations are only valid when they have been mutually agreed upon. We all know the unpleasant experience of other people having expectations we never agreed to.

THE CHURCH AS A NEW CULTURE

One of the greatest gifts we can give our world is to be a community of emotionally healthy adults who love well. This will take the power of God and a commitment to learn, grow, and break with unhealthy, destructive patterns that go back generations in our families and cultures—and in some cases, our Christian culture also.

Who do you need to make peace with today?