



For the last several weeks, we have been talking through a series of messages on the "Healing of Broken Relationships;" and we have been walking through some of the really tough stuff of what it means to be a Christ-follower. We have been talking about sin and brokenness; we have been talking about pain and hurt, about forgiveness and reconciliation; and all of this has been centering out of this one teaching of Jesus that we will be forgiven in the same way that we forgive. Last week, the title of the message was, "How to Become Friends Again." Towards the end, I walked through six (6) suggestions of a process that we can work through to become friends again—like cool off, write things down, take ownership of our own stuff and have a meeting face-to-face with another human being (and then maybe if that does not work, bring an objective third party with us).

We finally ended up with a sixth suggestion of writing a letter that we can only send if our heart is genuinely filled with the genuine love of God for the person to whom we are sending it. I am going to pick up the thought about that letter toward the end of today's message, but today we are going to take another step in this process. We want to come face-to-face with this reality—and the reality is this: sometimes, despite our best efforts, all of the confession, all of the repentance, all of the offering of reconciliation, sometimes after all the heartwork has been done, it just does not happen. So what if we can't be friends again?

What if we can't be friends again? What do we do then as people of faith? The short answer to this question is found in a very familiar prayer. It was first penned in the 1930s by a man named Reinhold Niebuhr; but in the years that followed, it has been adopted by twelve-step programs, and it is prayed regularly by persons who are trying to walk out of pains and hurts and hang ups. It goes like this: Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can and the wisdom to know the difference. If only we learn to live and pray like that, our lives would have much more serenity and peace. We would spend more time and energy on the things that have a chance to change, and then we would trust God to do His job on the rest of that stuff.

Unfortunately, we seldom do this—at least I do not. We like to be in control, we forget to be wise enough to trust that God is God and we are not; and we try to take matters into our own hands. We say the prayer, but we have trouble believing it. Someone recently sent me a different version of this prayer that pokes fun at our inability to let go and trust God. It goes something like this: Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to hide the bodies of the people I've killed because they've really ticked me off. Now honestly, which version are you more likely to pray? If you're like me, it depends upon the situation. It depends on how significant the pain is. It depends upon the condition of our hearts. I know the right answer, but sometimes I find it really hard to pray like the psalmist tells me to pray. The psalmist says be still and know that the Lord is God.

For the last several weeks, we have been trying to encourage and equip one an-

other to have the courage to change the things that we can in our broken relationships—to forgive, to release to resentment, to die to our pride, to walk in humility, to seek and offer reconciliation as we try to become friends again with people we have hurt, and also with people who have hurt us. Today, we have to face the fact that sometimes some things cannot change. We must and can repent, we must and can seek forgiveness, we must and can apologize, we must and can offer reconciliation—but sometimes we cannot be friends again. So here is our dilemma—we are called to be forgiven and forgiving, we are called to be reconciled and reconciling—but sometimes, it does not happen. Lord, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can; and, in these next few moments, Lord, give us wisdom that will help to know the difference.

It has been my experience that there are at least three kinds of life circumstances where courage and action are not enough. We can make all of the good faith effort we can to be friends again, but the wounds just will not—or cannot—heal. It is then that we need to commend one another to God and go our separate ways trusting that God will work for reconciliation in His own time. We can learn a great deal from this story from the fifteenth chapter of Acts, which records the break up of one of the great friendships in the New Testament—the great missionary partnership of Paul and Barnabas.

If there was ever a match made in heaven, it was Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas was the first Christ-follower in the Jerusalem church who accepted the apostle Paul after his conversion. While everybody else was holding Paul at arms length because of the considerable reputation he had as Saul of Tarsus—a persecutor of the church—it was Barnabas who remembered the power of God to make all things new. It was Barnabas who reached out and embraced him with open arms and lived into his nickname, the ‘Son of Encouragement.’ During their first missionary journey, their friendship galvanized as they endured a lifetime of trial and trauma and turmoil. They returned to Jerusalem as best friends, they were brothers in Christ and partners in ministry; and while they were there, they convinced the Christian leaders of the early church to endorse their ministry. In this passage they stand ready to take their ministry on a new trajectory.

The sky is the limit for the future for them; but they crash and burn, and all that triumph is left in tragedy. Just as they were about to leave on their second missionary journey, these two giants of the faith show us that they have feet of clay. This match that was made in heaven—which Paul and Barnabas needed, relied upon and brought the very best out of one another, how they complimented one another—it ended in a broken relationship. I love the Bible for many reasons, but one of the reasons I love it most is its honesty. The Bible is honest. It reflects the best and worst of our humanity, and we see it in this passage in Paul and Barnabas. There it is—right there in Acts chapter fifteen verse twenty-nine. These two friends—these two devout Christ-followers, these two persons who worked together, these Christian brothers, these co-workers in the fight—had a fight. The rift was over a teenage boy named John Mark. He had traveled with them on their first missionary journey and had left them early—probably because he was kind of a ‘mama’s boy.’

John Mark became homesick and went home; and in this passage, Barnabas in his customary ‘son of encouragement’ kind of way brings up the prospect that he wants to take John Mark on the journey; but Paul—probably frustrated because he had bailed on them the last time—did not want to take him. Paul was kind of strong-willed (maybe you have noticed that in the New Testament), and Barnabas was tender-hearted. Each of them was unflinching in their conviction. The Bible says in verse twenty-nine that they had a sharp contention (that’s Bible-ese for a

fight). They probably came to blows with one another because the root word for 'contention' is the same as the word for 'sickle.' In other words, this was a relationship-severing conversation. It cut their friendship in two, and they were either unwilling or unable or not ready to make it right. The Bible tells us in this passage that they went their separate ways.

Paul took Silas and went on his way, and Barnabas took John Mark and went to Cyprus, and they never worked together again. We do not have any record that they worked together again in the Scripture. Does that ever happen to you? Have you ever had a relationship-severing event in your life—something that has cut a friendship in two? A rift occurs; and no matter how hard we try, we find ourselves in a situation where we are unwilling or unable or not ready to make it right. It has happened to me, too. So what then? What are we suppose to do when we cannot forgive, when we cannot be forgiven, when we cannot be reconciled with another person—what if we can't be friends again? How can we have serenity enough to accept the things that we cannot change when we have acted courageously to try to change the things that we can?

It has been my experience that there are three different kind of life circumstances where we cannot be friends, and each of these life circumstances teach us a way in which to get over this. The first one is this: we cannot become friends again when the other person does not want to. Sometimes couples get divorced, sometimes parents and children do not talk, sometimes neighbors build fences, sometimes the other party wants nothing to do with us. It is in those moments we learn the painful lesson that, while it takes two people to make a relationship, in reality it only takes one person to permanently break one.

For several weeks, we have been talking about doing the heart work necessary to live in forgiveness and reconciliation. We attempt to forgive, we take the initiative, we reach out; and if we are wrong, we confess it, we die to ourselves, we own our stuff and we extend an apology and ask for forgiveness. And if somebody has done something wrong to us, we take the steps to get our hearts ready. We release our anger, we give up our right for resentment and we do what is necessary to keep our hearts soft and supple enough so that when the time comes that we might be able to give and receive forgiveness from one another. We do this even if the other person is not prepared to realize it—but what if the other person does not reciprocate? What do we do then? This passage tells us that when that happens—when there is a sharp contention, a relationship-severing conflict and we cannot make it right—we commend them to God and go on with our lives. And we leave the door of the relationship ajar enough so that, if they choose to come walking back through, they can do that.

We need to give God the room to do the same thing in somebody else's heart that He has apparently been able to do in ours. That is what is going on in this passage between Paul and Barnabas. They realize that forcing the issue of reconciliation would have done more harm than good. There is nothing more fracturing to a group of people, there is nothing more fracturing to a relationship than false reconciliation. When we come to a place of repentance and forgiveness—when both parties are not ready to do that—and Paul and Barnabas, I have a sense, recognized that if they had done something in a false way—it would have done more harm to the Kingdom than good. So they split up. They commended each other to God, and they went their separate ways while leaving the door open for a later time.

Paul went on to missionary fame with Silas, and Barnabas went with John Mark to Cyprus. We never hear from Barnabas again. He is not mentioned in the Acts of the

Apostles again, but let me tell you what I believe happened. I believe that—true to his nature just as he had done with the Apostle Paul—Barnabas poured himself into John Mark (who would later become the traveling companion of Simon Peter). John Mark would hear the Gospel of Jesus preached through the personality of Peter and would later write it down in what we now call the Gospel of Mark. They never traveled together again; but later in Paul's life, while he was under house arrest in Rome, the Scriptures tell us that he sent for John Mark because he was useful to him. Later, at the end of the letter to the Colossians, Paul writes that John Mark—the cousin of Barnabas—was by his side in the work that was being done in Rome.

While we never have record of Paul and Barnabas working together again, in the living out of relationship between Paul and John Mark, God redeemed a severed relationship. Can you think of a situation in your own life where a relationship has been severed? Now I am not saying that we should not try to forgive and be forgiving. God calls us to a ministry of reconciliation; but after we have done all that we can do and the other party is unwilling to reconcile, then all we can do is commend them to God and go on with our lives—leaving the door open in a relationship that they can come walking back through. I have had this happen in my own life.

When I graduated from seminary, I worked on the staff of a church; and the other pastor and I had a very tight relationship. (Actually, my dad was the Pastor; but his guy was kind of like a second father in the faith to me.) He gave me more opportunities than I should have been allowed to have, and a great deal of who I am today is because of the way that he poured himself into me. After we had worked together for about six and a half years, however, he and I had a sharp contention with one another; and for the sake of the church, we needed to go our separate ways. Now the Kingdom increased because of that—that church continued to grow, and I went to began to grow, and there are people in the Kingdom of God because we separated from one another. We commended one another to God and went on with our lives.

Approximately three years later—after a series of carefully-written, God-loving letters to one another—we met face-to-face and began (and did) work through the tough stuff of reconciliation of a broken relationship. It took a long time, and both of us had to be ready. To tell you how secure that is now, he is in his late seventies; and the last time we spoke together, he said, "You know, Jeff, when I die, would please come and preach my funeral?" Only God can do that. Only God can take a situation in which both parties are unwilling to reconcile—we can commend one another to God, we can go on with our lives and give God the room to do what only God can do.

A second life situation where this comes to bear is when one or the other parties may be harmed. Here is a fact: there are a great many dysfunctional relationships, and as Christ-followers, we can forgive, we can be forgiven, but we cannot and should not go back into some of the same relationships unless they have undergone a fundamental change. For example, there are many abusive relationships out there. Maybe a spouse has been abusive, maybe a parent has been abusive, maybe an authority figure has intimidated us, maybe a friend continually manipulates us or a confidant continually betrays us. These are emotionally unhealthy, victimizing relationships that were never really friendships to begin with.

God can—and does—work within us to enable us to forgive; but unless the other party goes through some of the special life-altering treatment and help that they can have, we should never re-enter that kind of relationship. It is harmful for us unless it fundamentally changes. Sometimes we are the ones who have been the abusers—we are the ones who have done something that is wrong—and we can re-

pent and ask for forgiveness all we want. Until we receive the life-changing professional help we need, we should not expect to walk right back into the relationship that we have abused.

Let me give you another example. Sometimes we are partners in co-dependent and enabling behavior. Somebody in our circle—whether it is in our family or somebody that is in our close circle of friends—has behavior that is destructive to them and everybody else around them. But we adjust our lives in order to keep them in place. For example, some of us may have a spouse who has an alcohol issue that wreaks havoc in our marriage and on our family. Some of us might have a child that has a drug habit that is more regular than their school attendance. Some of us might have co-workers who have work habits that are constantly under par, and we are constantly covering for them. We might have a friend that engages in behavior that is innately selfish and destructive to any hope for intimacy that they could ever have, and we adjust our lives in order to enable that behavior so they can stay in relationship with us.

If we make excuses—if we always look the other way—and if we try to cover it up and deny its reality, then we are not helping. All we are doing is enabling destructive behavior and delaying the inevitable—which is not healthy. So what should we do? We can forgive, we can be forgiven, but we cannot have the same kind of relationship again. We cannot keep enabling. We must initiate a change to get the kind of help necessary for the individual that is sick—to guard the relationship from continuing to cause harm and break the cycle of destruction.

Over the last several years, I have been a part of a large number of meetings with persons and family systems that are in small groups where they have decided that it was time to address the dysfunction in an individual's life. These are some of the hardest conversations to have, but it is the only conversation to have if there is ever going to be hope for wholeness in that individual's life and if the individual parts of a family are ever going to be all that God calls them to be.

Sometimes the other person is not willing, sometimes we cannot go back into a relationship because it would cause harm, but there is a third one. The third one is: we cannot become friends again when the other person is dead. Sometimes the clock does run out. Sometimes it is too late, and I guarantee you that all of us will go through life with some unresolved rifts in our relationships. Sometimes the clock will strike midnight before we have time to seek and give forgiveness face-to-face. When that first happens, you might have a sense of relief; but God has a way of reminding us of our need to settle accounts—even with those who have died. And God will not let us go until the issues that we carry in our hearts are resolved. Why? Because our relationship with God will never be all that it can be until we are willing to forgive and be forgiven.

The person may be dead and buried, but the issue is alive and well; and if we listen carefully to the conversation that is going on inside of our hearts, we know that it is dominating us and clouding all of our other relationships. So who or what do you need to forgive? Some of us may have a parent who said careless words, and they showed favoritism that has scarred us. I have someone in my extended family system that is the second child—born ten years after the oldest child—and that second child was told by his mother and father that the only reason they had him was as an insurance policy in case the older child did not work out well. Can you imagine the unresolved stuff that that person has carried around in their heart for the last sixty-plus years? Can you imagine that a parent would do that? But it happens. It happens all the time.

Sometimes people will sexually abuse another person, sometimes a teacher will humiliate us and crush our esteem, and sometimes people will desert us when we need them the most. Sometimes we have an alcoholic sibling or parent who will beat us and will drink our food money away. Sometimes we have a mother whose poor self esteem has fostered sibling rivalry. Sometimes we have parents that have used us in a very adult game of chess, and it is never been fair. Who is that we need to forgive? What did they do to us?

Here is the truth: we must—we need to forgive them if we are ever going to be whole. Some of us also need to be forgiven because we have done something to someone who has gone ahead and died. For what or by whom do you need to be forgiven? Is it a parent that you disrespected and never honored? Is it the victim of an accident that you were involved in that you walked away from but they were forever scarred? Is it a friend who died alone because you did not know what to do when they were diagnosed, and you just kind of stayed away? Is it the father we disappointed or the mother we let down? Is it the recipient of the act that we committed that we regret the most? What is it that you need to be forgiven for?

We must—we need to be forgiven if we are ever going to be whole. So what should we do if we can't be friends again? What should we do if it is impossible to forgive and be forgiven in person? Do you remember the letters we talked about last week? Here is what we can do: we can write a letter that we will never mail, but we can use that letter to release us from the things that bind us. We can pray it through—we can write a letter that is filled with the perfect love that we have for God for the person that we need to write to. We can write a letter in which we are willing to forgive and willing to be forgiven. We are willing to release from resentment, we are willing to settle accounts, and then we write it out very carefully.

And then—here is the important part—we find a person who is trustworthy. Someone that we know will never share it with somebody else. Somebody who can be Jesus for us with skin on, and we read that letter to them confessionally. We allow them to tell us that in the name of Jesus we are forgiven and then we take the letter and we can tear it up, we can shred it, we can burn it, we can bury it, but we allow that letter to release those things that bind us. Over the last several years, I have had the opportunity to walk with a great number of people through the fifth step of a twelve-step program in which they have taken inventory of all the things that are wrong that have been done to them and all the wrongs that they have done; and in a confessional kind of way, they worked through that. Every once in a while, we will get to a situation that is just a block.

One woman in particular comes to mind who had been abused by a dad and then had rebelled against the mother—so she had both ends here. She had a person that was really difficult for her to forgive, and she had a person that she did not think she could ever be forgiven by; and we did the hard work of writing through all of that stuff. The letter was ten pages long. I still remember the day we got in the car and drove a couple hours out into the hills of Pennsylvania to a cemetery where both mom and dad were buried—next to one another—and I watched as their forty-something daughter stood at the foot of her parents' graves. I stood at the head; and through a tear-streaked face, she read to her parents that letter that said the things she needed to say—and she was released.

After she had read the letter, I reminded her of the promise of our faith that—in the name of Jesus Christ—she was forgiven and so was her mother and father. I took a spade out of the car and dug a hole right there between her parents' graves. And

about twelve inches under the ground, we buried her past. For the first time in her whole life, she was alive. Maybe it is that time for you. Maybe it is time for you to be released. I know the only way that happens is how—either literally or figuratively—you have to come to the feet of Jesus. I have to come to the foot of the Cross, and I have to forgive and be forgiven—or else I will never be whole. Please allow this to be the act of faith that enables us to pray, “Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”