



WISDOM FOR RELATIONSHIPS

SERIES: JUDGES: CONQUERING THE IDOLS OF OUR HEART

Judges 14

11th Message

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Barbara Streisand sings a song entitled People—“people who need people are the luckiest people in the world.” People are very important to us. They are a source of great joy. What would life be like without people? Not great. However, we don’t always want people around. At times life would be so much easier if we could simply avoid them. People create all sorts of stress, pain, anxiety, and general disruption. We long to get married, we long for our spouse to get things right, family seems to take an incredible amount of time and effort, and friendships can become strained. Just encountering a clerk at a store or being honked at by an impatient driver can ruin our day. Dogs and horses are so much easier—at least that is what my wife keeps telling me when I drive her crazy.

Why can’t people just get along? The reason is that we are a fallen humanity. We do not live according to God’s design for life. The way sin manifests itself is primarily in relationships, starting with God and moving down the line. As a result, relationships can become very unhealthy. But redemption and becoming a new creation in Christ also manifests itself in relationships where we seek love and truth. We can be kind when we disagree and be tenderhearted and compassionate even when we don’t feel like it. Colossians 3:12-17 is an example of the many New Testament exhortations of how we are to relate to others.

Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col 3:12–17 ESV)

We are winding down our summer study in the book of Judges. The book began with a great couple by the name of Othniel and Acsah. But as we have gone along, we have seen the deterioration not only of an idolatrous Israel and its judges but also of family and tribal relationships. Gideon ends up with a mess in his family that manifests itself with his son Abimelech. Jephthah is willing to sacrifice his own daughter. He cares more about himself than he cares about her. Ephraim’s jealousy of Gilead is deadly, and Samson keeps running after women that seem right in his eyes. And believe it or not, things get worse in the last 5 chapters of the book.

So, we thought we would take a week in the middle of the Samson story to talk relationships. This is a big topic and we could talk about a lot of things. I have debated long and hard about what to say. But instead of talking about one specific area, I thought I would touch

on some basic wisdom that could apply to dating, marriage, family, friends, or work.

Idols and Expectations

The book of Judges is largely about idols. People can also be idols. Rudyard Kipling wrote in his poem entitled “If” these insightful lines:

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much

The reality is that people will hurt us and we will hurt other people. But think about the last line. People should count but perhaps some people count too much.

People can become a god. We can worship and serve people in the way we worship wealth or success, hoping that they will make us happy and satisfy our God-given desires for love, acceptance, value, intimacy, etc. Our expectations for parents and siblings, spouses and children, co-workers and friends, love and romance can be so incredibly high that we will be constantly disappointed. We place on people a weight that is simply too great for anyone to carry. The gap between expectations and reality can be huge.

The book of Judges shows us several things. First, the result of worshipping false gods is enslavement. That can happen with people. If people count too much or take on idol status, we will be controlled by what they think of us, what they say to us, and how they respond to us. Our focus will be seeking their approval and validation. Second, God will frustrate us from getting what we want, like he did Israel. Third, God wants to be our God. He wants to be first in our lives, that we might look to him to supply all of our needs in Christ Jesus. We must transfer to God what we look for from others. What frees us to love other people and have healthier relationships is looking to God to be our primary source of love and identity.

Certainly this applies to marriage. I know this was true for me. Often we marry an idol and we expect something that is beyond the scope of what God intended. Parents can also take on an idol status. They can control us long after we have moved out of the house, even after they have died.

Years ago I was teaching a small class on emotional control, using the dynamics of living under the law we find in Galatians. I started the class by asking, “Who has the most control over your life.” And an older woman spoke up saying, “My parents who have long since died.” I don’t know if this woman’s parents were an idol, but her words still illustrate the danger of idolatry. When we make people into idols, they have a huge effect on our life.

Organic Nature

People are complex, and therefore relationships of all kinds are tricky and mysterious. We can't come up with easy-to-follow rules and formulas for starting, growing, and maintaining them. Relationships can't be engineered or manufactured. What works in business doesn't work with friends. Relationships need to be cultivated in the way one cares for a garden. The fruit of the Spirit is relational. Fruit, vegetables, flowers, and trees are organic and must be cultivated to grow.

I always tell singles that if you try and define a relationship too early you will kill it. You can't take someone to coffee and say you intend to marry him or her. They will bolt for the door.

In marriage I have discovered that the rules that worked yesterday with my wife may not apply tomorrow. My wife and I may be connected one day, but after spending several days not communicating much we need to spend time together to maintain the relationship. One good weekend away won't cut it. Marriage needs constant care.

You can't start a bible study and expect everyone to spill their guts on the first night without knowing the other people in the room. Achieving that intimacy and vulnerability in a bible study or fellowship group takes time. It takes time to create a safe place where people can share their lives and pray for one another to grow in Christ.

One of our problems in relationships is that we have fears and insecurities. We are guarded and private. We make assumptions about people and judge them without really knowing them. Have you ever had the experience of assuming something about another person and find out later that it wasn't true at all? Cultivating relationships is a matter of opening to another person gradually, a matter of listening, asking questions, and understanding. Broken relationships can't be fixed with just words, but rather have to be replanted and regrown.

Waiting on God

One of the issues we see in Samson is the desire for instant gratification. He saw a woman in Timnah and told his dad, "get her for me." He wanted her right now. But much of life is spent waiting, even with all our modern technology—for airplanes, doctors, a clerk to check out our groceries. And we wait for God to reveal his plans and purposes. The psalmist writes:

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning, (Ps 130:5–6 ESV)

Waiting can be good for the soul. And this applies to people. We can't force or demand another person to be what we want. We can't fix or change a brother or sister. Instead of trying to change our spouse, we wait for God to work. We hand over the responsibility to God. Instead of controlling our children, we wait for them to make decisions for themselves. We wait for someone to apologize or seek reconciliation or have an honest conversation. If we don't know whether this is the person to marry, then wait to see what grows. Time is your friend.

That being said, there are things we wait for that will not happen—marriage, children to come to the Lord, healing from a disease. For some things, we wait for the new heavens and new earth, when God brings complete restoration. And this can be the case with people.

Some people will not change in our lifetime and some relationships won't be healed. So we have to let go and surrender them to God. This seems to apply particularly with family. The patterns for family dynamics get so ingrained and repetitious. Holidays can simply be a replay of past holidays. Nothing seems to change. And so we wait on God to give us health and freedom in those family relationships even if they don't change.

Friendship First

Our relationships would be so much healthier if we sought to be friends as a top priority. Our tendency can be seeking to gain something from a relationship—acceptance, love, approval, or sympathy. We can be self-focused rather than other-centered. We try to control the conversation. We are constantly thinking of what we will say, instead of listening to the other person. Imagine being free to listen to someone else rather than talking about yourself.

Friendship is a two-way street of listening and sharing desires and disappointments, fears and joys, without trying to fix the other or exalt yourself over another. Friends can just be with one another. Friends seek to encourage and support growth in another, rather than being critical and judgmental of someone's faults and weaknesses. Of course this involves love and truth, as the apostle Paul talks about in Ephesians. In real friendship, we can accept advice and correction without being defensive or angry, because we know this other person is on our side.

When we begin dating something, infatuation can be really fun. But what will sustain the relationship and make it healthy will be growing a friendship. Married couples need to continue to grow a friendship rather than just get things done. Getting to know your spouse is a lifelong journey. After 42 years of marriage I keep learning things everyday about my wife. One of the things I appreciate about my wife is that she can listen when I lament and complain. She can accept me when I am tired and weary. She knows who I am and she can be a friend. How about having the perspective of friendship with a sister or father? Perhaps God could help us change our mindset in those relationships.

This isn't easy, and the closer people are to us the tougher it becomes. It is so much easier to be friends with someone you have coffee with once a month than it is to be a friend with parents, a spouse, an adult child, or your in-laws. We might need some healthy boundaries in these relationships and the boundaries might vary depending on the person. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try, with God's strength, to seek some level of friendship and common ground with the people in our life.

Community and Balance

What we see in Samson is isolation. Jephthah was not much better with his empty companions. No matter the season of life, community is essential. Lack of community and isolation are symptomatic of other issues.

People are God's business, and community is essential for growth in Christ. This is where we learn to live out all the "one another" exhortations of the New Testament. This is where we learn to love our neighbor and thus fulfill the law of Christ. Not only do we involve ourselves in church community but also our neighborhood, our work, charities, and people we meet at the coffee shop. We balance time alone and with family by spending time with others. We balance time with Christians and non-Christians. We seek to be

Jesus to the people God has put in our life. And we welcome these people.

When two people begin to date it is important for them to balance time with each other with time with friends. Healthy relationships are involved in, not isolated from, community. When I ministered with young singles it was always a yellow flag when two people started dating and disappeared from the community.

Married couples still need to be involved in community, whether it is a church community or the community at large. I know this is even more difficult for single people. This is an area that the church, our church, might be more aware of. Married couples and families can always do a better job of reaching out to single people and including them in their family. When we get older, our ministry is not done. We can be mentors to younger people. Everyone wants an older person in their lives who loves and accepts them. We never stop longing for mother and father figures in our lives. Mentors are not to take the place of God, but they can encourage others with their walk with God. Older people have so much wisdom to pass onto the younger generation.

Agenda for Transformation

People are God's business, and people are God's business for us. Yes, our life would be so much easier if we were rid of all of the difficult people, but God puts these people in our lives for a reason. He wants to reveal things in us that he wants to change. The things that bug us about another person are probably things that we do as well. We see our flaws in others. People give us a mirror to our soul. People are God's agenda for transformation.

God's goal for each of us is to be formed in Christ. This happens through the Word of God, prayer, and the people in our lives. There are no mistakes. God puts you in a job for a reason. God plants you in a church for a reason. There are no perfect churches. We give ourselves to a spiritual community so that we can be transformed while we minister to others. People reveal to us our fears and selfishness. The closer people are to us the more they reveal. Marriage unmasks us more than anything. Our family of origin always provides opportunities for growth, no matter how healthy it is. We may not be happy with our boss, but we can believe he or she is in our life for a reason.

Lately my wife has had a few people lash out at her in anger and accuse her falsely. It is has been very difficult for her. But Liz isn't trying to blame them. Instead she is constantly asking, "what is God telling me? How am I supposed to change? How can I be a better person?" That is the kind of attitude and mindset that allows for transformation. We should talk to the Lord and ask him where he is at work in these relationships.

There is a lot more I could say. And I have probably made it sound way too easy. But people are important. People count. People are God's business. At the end of life, what will be meaningful is not our accomplishments, but the relationships that God has given us along the way, people we have shared life with, people who have touched us and whom we have touched.

And now may the grace of God be with us so that in "whatever (we) do, in word or deed, (we) do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Colossians 3:17)

