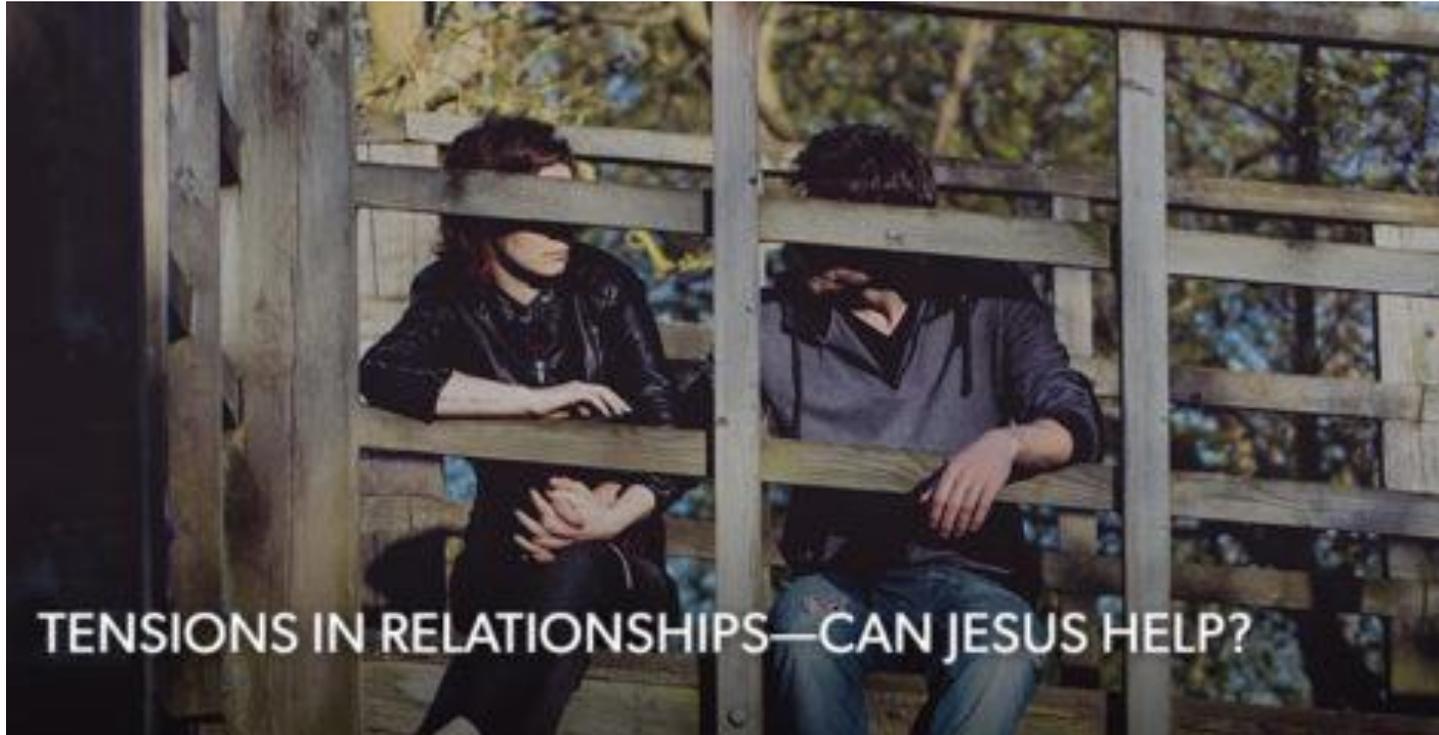


Tensions in Relationships—Can Jesus Help?

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I have many hurting relationships in mind. I am picturing grown men bawling buckets of tears while angry voices echo in my head. This is my life weekly. Thankfully, I am also remembering stabilized relationships even after adultery, and men and women learning to control their volume rather than using their voices as a weapon to cut or bash one another. What makes the difference?

Well, of course you know what I'm going to say. Yes, it's the gospel. The good news, or more accurately, the great, amazing news that Jesus can and should make a radical difference in a life! He really does. He really can. This is Paul's theme in Ephesians 4:1-6, where at the hinge point in the book, he pleads with us to live consistent with who we say we are as Christians.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were

called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:1-6).

Motivation for Change

In the Roman colony of Ephesus, he writes to Jews and Gentiles who are part of this new thing called the Church. Can you imagine the potential tension? Roman soldiers, now saved, in the Church with Jews who have come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah! Each had been raised to have no respect for one another and, even worse, to hate one another. Sound familiar? Such attitudes divide us today. What can motivate a person to respond to others differently? Even more pointed—what could move you to do relationships differently than the way you do?

For Paul, the motivation is our “calling” (Eph. 4:1). He urges us to live up to who we say we are. In other words, let the reality of who you are in Christ make a difference in your relationships. Or, more pointedly, your relationship with Christ should make a difference in how you treat others.

Who are you? Chapter one of Ephesians says you are the lavishly forgiven, the broken who have been redeemed, the alienated who have been adopted (Eph. 1:3-8). Paul also states that we are directly related to the head of the universe and have resurrection power available to us because of this amazing relationship (Eph. 1:18-23)! Now live like it in relationship to others.

What does this mean? If I’ve been lavishly forgiven, I must forgive lavishly. Since I’ve been shown abundant mercy, I should be abundantly merciful. Since I’ve been drawn near as an outcast, I must draw near to others and adopt them, welcome them. Sound impossible? It is for you... but not for the resurrected Christ, the head of the universe, working in you.

Methodology—Christ-like Character Traits

You don’t see Paul writing that if you’re a certain personality type these character traits are just not possible. It is hard to imagine God saying, “Well, since you’re a Type A, I get it, you can’t talk gently to others and exercise patience. You’re just wired to give orders, to be bossy and demanding.” On the contrary, he is calling us all to these Christ-like traits of humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance (Eph. 4:2). Remember, we’re being called to live up to who we say we are as the adopted of Christ, living like our head. I’ve studied these character traits throughout Scripture and each one of them is used of our Lord or the Trinity. Paul is urging us to be like our Lord!

Think of the opposites. The opposites of these traits destroy relationships and make people hard to live with. Pride doesn’t really listen but just waits for the other to finish talking to express a personal opinion that is deemed more important. Harshness and irritability create an environment where it is not safe to talk, and people feel like they are walking on eggshells instead of being in relationships that are inviting. Intolerance makes others feel like they are being judged and no one can meet the standard. The opposites of the character traits commended in Ephesians 4:2 destroy relationships.

Are you hard to live with or easy to live with? I really don’t want to be a high-maintenance person, do you?

Analyzing why these are difficult

Praise God, character traits can change. You can have healthier relationships. The source of the change must originate in your heart, your treasures, your value system. Since your value system is about your treasures, you could say it is the source of what you worship (see Matthew 12:34-35).

Jesus says we speak out of what fills the heart (Matthew 12:34). He then equates the heart with our treasures (verse 35). What in the world could be treasured enough that you speak irritably or demanding or condescending? What could possibly be valued enough that you become intolerant?

How about these as possibilities?

- Control—No one talks to me that way! If you would just follow my plan, there would be no tension.
- Loving Comfort—I need “me” time. You interrupted my movie! I want peace and I’m willing to fight you to get it!

Do you want to have more godly character qualities and healthier relationships? Do you want the Lord to make a difference in the way you do relationships? Do you desire the tensions to subside? Does it sound good to be an easier person to live with? If so, ask the Lord to change your value system. Work on living for the opposites of the type of things listed above: God’s control instead of your control; God’s agenda of loving Him and others instead of loving your own “me” time.

Here are a few suggestions: Look at the list of character traits in Ephesians 4:2 (humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance) and think of the opposites. Then ask yourself which ones would be key to work on. Ask yourself what is being treasured so much that it impacts these character qualities negatively. What would the opposite of that treasure be, using biblical thinking?

Jesus can make a difference in relationships! The gospel makes it possible to change.

Questions for Reflection

Do you believe personalities can change? How do character traits relate to personality? What practices make relationships healthier?