

Dashboard: Relationships ***Delivered January 29, 2012***

One of the things that I don't particularly like about myself is that I tend to be a reactive person rather than a proactive person. I can procrastinate with the best of them, especially when it comes to something that I don't really want to deal with at the time. This tendency gets exaggerated even more when I know that the situation I face is going to cost me money somehow. For that reason, I am horrible at preventive maintenance, especially on my vehicles. I put off getting my oil changed (and don't tell me I can do that myself) until the little light comes on my dashboard to tell me it's time. I don't get the tires rotated like I'm supposed to, I don't deal with these things until I can't avoid dealing with them any more.

Of course you can all see my problem just as well as I can. In the end, I spend more time and money on fixing problems that would have cost me less if I had dealt with them when they were small. If I had rotated the tires, I wouldn't have had to buy a new set of tires, if I had brought the car in for a routine checkup, I might have avoided larger problems down the road. If I had addressed things from a more proactive standpoint, it would have helped me in the long run.

When I don't address the small things to fix my car, I can't expect it to go on running like it always has, because it's not meant to do that. It needs regular, preventive maintenance. It needs attention. And if that's the case with something as passing as a car that will last for a decade or so and then will need to be traded in, then you have to wonder how much more important it is to pay attention to regular maintenance in other areas of our lives.

One of those areas is the last one we're going to check in our dashboard series – relationships. I sometimes find that my reactive approach to maintenance in my car creeps over to my relationships as well. I can just as easily slip into the habit of reacting to what is happening in the moment with my wife, or my kids, or my friends instead of being proactive and creating a healthy relationship from the beginning that could or would prevent problems from arising in the first place. It's better, and probably in the long run easier, to build a healthy relationship than it is to fix an unhealthy one.

I know that what's true of me in this may be true of a lot of us. It can be difficult to deal with issues proactively – we can't seem to bring ourselves to talk about them until the warning light on the dashboard is flashing and we feel like we can't avoid them any more. Sometimes we wait so long to deal with the issue that we do more damage to the relationship while we're trying to avoid fixing it, and it costs us more in the long run that it would have if we would have taken the time to address them when they were smaller. Because the one thing we can acknowledge about relationships, especially the close ones, is that when things are not going well, it is really difficult to ignore them; something has to get taken care of right now.

The other side of the coin is that there are times that we wait so long to address the things going on in our relationships – the bitterness, contention, the anger, the suspicion – that we get to a certain point where we feel like it's just too late for us to

make a change. So we begin to despair, we begin to think that there's nothing we can do to fix the relationship, that it is too far gone, it will cost too much to fix and so we start checking out. We start checking out of our marriage, checking out of our relationship with our kids, checking out of friendships and even contemplate finding new ones. We could find a new spouse who would love us better, find new kids who don't know all of our faults, find new friends who won't challenge us – but we end up bringing the same junk along with us into all the new places. Until we learn to be proactive about it, I'm convinced we'll keep running into a big flashing "check engine" light in this area of our lives.

We're going to read from ***Colossians 3:12-15*** but also refer to the rest of chapter 3 and beginning of chapter 4.

Most often when I've looked at this text, I've looked at it and focused on the end of chapter three and beginning of chapter four because that's where Paul writes about the kinds of relationships most of us find ourselves in. But before Paul gets to that list of relationships and how we're supposed to act in each of them, he writes about what I would consider the foundational principles for all good relationships. These are the gauges that we need to pay attention to, and that we should get to work on proactively if we can, but reactively if we have to.

The first part of the passage actually sounds pretty familiar from our talk a couple of weeks ago on the emotional gauge. That's not surprising, because when you think about it, the emotional and relational gauges are very closely connected to one another. So Paul writes that we should clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Three of the words are exactly the same from the list that Paul writes in Galatians 5.

The force of this passage is on the way that we interact with other people if we claim to be followers of Jesus. Because if we claim to be following Jesus then we are being invited to live in very different kinds of relationships. In other words, imagine if your relationships were to be characterized by these words. Imagine if these qualities were like the clothing you put on in the morning, the first impression others would have of you would be based on these. Envision how your relationships could be affected for the better if you took off your old clothing of cynicism, anger, and those kinds of things.

If you are willing to live this way, then we should bear with one another and forgive one another, which is such a huge part of any relationship. You have to appreciate that there is no relationship you will ever have that does not require the quality of bearing with one another and offering forgiveness. In fact, if you take some time for honest reflection you might probably find that you need to receive forgiveness at least as often as you are required to give it. In that sense, forgiveness may be the greatest gift to any relationship that you could possibly imagine. Sometimes we are trying to fix relationships with all kinds of other gifts to mask over the issues we're having, when in fact some genuine forgiveness could be much more powerful.

On the other hand, few things will do as much damage to a relationship as the bitterness that creeps into relationships when we carry around our lists of offenses,

insults, and ill will that have built up inside of us. Whatever the relationship context – not just your spouse, but with your kids, with your boss, with your coworkers – bitterness is like poison eating away at our souls. Forgiveness is not only a gift to the person who has hurt us, but it is a gift to ourselves that frees us from the weight and the bondage we carry around on our shoulders when we hold onto it.

And above all these, he says, we need to make sure we put on love – which is again at the top of a list like this. Love will hold all of these virtues together, empowering all of our relationships, bringing them together in unity and peace in our hearts. In other words, we cannot hope to do any of these things, to effect any kind of changes in our relationships without true love motivating us in that regard. If we haven't embraced God's love for us first, followed by his command that we would let his love flow through us to others, then there's no chance to fix the relationships.

Relational health is built upon the foundation of love. Without it, no relationship will survive, never mind thrive and grow to its fullest potential. Obviously there are different kinds of love that are expressed in your different relationships – you don't love your wife in the same way you love your boss – but the command to love is in view for all of them. When Christ's love fills up our hearts, it transforms the way we look at every person, seeing them in truth through the eyes of Christ's love and forgiveness.

I can't think of a better foundation for any of our relationships than that one. Instead of being the fault-finders and the nit-pickers in the relationships, we become the person who extends grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Instead of being the person in the relationship who always has a critical word, we become the ones who choose to express love regardless of conditions, regardless of what comes back to us, and regardless of whether or not we think the person acts in a way that is worthy of the love we express.

You want to know how to set the stage for your marriage relationship – it starts with humility, compassion, forgiveness and above all a truly unconditional love. You want to know how to shape your relationship with your kids? It starts with kindness, gentleness, forgiveness and comes together in unconditional love for them. You want to know how to interact in your workplace, in your relationships with people outside in your community who are not yet followers of Jesus? It starts with a commitment to live our lives proactively by building these into every single relationship.

And if your relationships are not where they should be, I want to remind you that it is not too late to begin to invest these in them now. Your kids aren't too far gone, your parents aren't too far away, and your spouse isn't a hopeless case. It really is a matter of submitting all of our relationships to Jesus' lordship, to allow his design for every one of those relationships to be at the front of our minds so that we would truly desire what he has for each of them.

We want to have the healthiest, most fundamentally sound relationships we can possibly have so that when we talk about the ways that Jesus is changing our lives, we can point to the quality of our relationships as evidence of the kind of work that God is doing in us. No self-help book is going to get there, but when we submit our relationships to his will and his way, then we have a great chance of seeing his vision come true.