

Forming Relationships – Week 3

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In our sermon series addressing our Mission Statement at Our Savior's Way, we have been focusing on the first part which is the formation of relationships. We have seen how our God is a God of relationship between each of us and Himself, and between each of us and the others around us. This set of relationships form a cross with our Lord and Savior Jesus at the center of it. We know that our God has called us into a relationship with Him and saved us and preserves us so that we may serve Him. We are truly blessed to be one of His children and saved by His grace. In His love for us, He has promised us our spiritual freedom and a place in the spiritual land of heaven and He has laid on us no obligations other than to love, serve, and honor Him and to love, serve, and honor our neighbors. All this happens in the context of the church, which is led by Jesus, as a communion or community of saints – on earth and in heaven.

The picture seems so perfect, doesn't it? But we must remember that we humans are still the harbingers of original sin and what God has created and deemed often becomes tainted by the involvement of sinful humans driven by Satan who wants to destroy our relationships with each other and with God.

Let's look at what happened in the Bible, the starting place for our spiritual knowledge and wisdom. God made several covenants or agreements or contracts with His people. The Bible talks a lot about covenants. In a generic sense, a

covenant is an agreement or contract. But in the Bible, it takes on an elevated meaning. In Scripture, a covenant is a promise from God to his people.

There are two types of covenants. One is conditional. This means that to receive God's promised blessing, we need to do something first—or avoid doing something. If we don't do our part, God has no obligation to do His part. If we break our portion of the covenant, the whole thing is void.

The other type of covenant is unconditional. In these covenants, God promises to do something for us and doesn't require anything in return. For example, His love for us is unconditional. There's nothing we can do to earn it, and there's nothing we can do to lose it. It's always there, unconditionally so.

The very first covenant was with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They were told they could eat anything they wanted except for fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden, known as the tree of knowledge of good and evil. If they obeyed these two instructions, they could live in the Garden of Eden and experience a close and personal relationship with God each evening. But if they were to eat fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they had to leave.

God drove them out of that beautiful setting, and they were separated from the direct presence of God. Their relationship in this covenant with God was conditional, and they fell short. In the same way, so do we based on a future covenant.

The second great covenant God made was with Noah and his family. Because of the sinfulness of the whole world, God decided to end His relationship with almost all the

humans of the world and destroy them. He caused the Great Flood but, in His love, He spared Noah and his family (eight people – Noah, his wife, their three sons, and their wives) and two of every living creature. Afterward, God promised to never again destroy people with a flood. This covenant was unconditional, and a promise God has kept, but man has not preserved the relationship with God any better than Adam and Eve did.

Last week, we heard about the covenant between God and Abram (a pagan who was living in Ur in Mesopotamia). God moved to create His people when He called Abraham to go to a new place and into a new relationship. God promises that He will grow Abraham into a great nation. Through him, God will bless all nations. This is another unconditional covenant. However, as Abraham demonstrates his faithfulness to God, God continues to expand the scope of His promises to Abraham.

About 500 years later, God called Moses to save His people who were slaves in Egypt. God gave definition to how His people were to relate to Him and each other. He gave Moses rules of what to do and what not to do. We call this the Law. If people obey God's Law, He will bless them. If they don't follow God's expectations, He will withhold blessings. This was/is a conditional covenant; God has done His part but humans including His own people have fallen miserably short in fulfilling their part.

One of God's people who fell woefully short was His servant who was the King of His people during their Golden age, King David. David was a man after God's own heart, but David was a miserable sinner. He was a party to adultery and arranged for a murder. The relationship

between David and God, which had been so close and personal, led God to the next covenant. God's covenant to David and to His people was that his descendants would sit on the throne of His people forever. And for twenty generations this is what happened. But, because of sinful actions especially idolatry, the physical rule of David's line ended. The covenant did not because David's descendant and heir, Jesus, arose as the ultimate King who now rules forever. This brings us to the sixth major covenant.

Over time, the people of God and their church slowly modified and expanded the rules that governed their relationship with each other and with God. Sin crept into the plan that God had made for His people of loving Him and loving each other. The ten rules became over 600 rules. The church of the people of God became more and more exclusive and rigid. Factions formed within the leadership and priesthood which deviated from the Word of God and led people astray. God's people themselves became more alienated from Him by focusing on rules of how to behave rather than showing love and concern for others. A "we" versus "them" mentality crept into the relationships. There was not only enmity between Jews and non-Jews, there was also an enmity between sects of Jews. Hatred replaced love. A hard spirit developed, and outward behavior replaced a spirit and heart for the love of God and each other. The church developed a hierarchy of the ok, the good, the better, and the best. No one is better than anyone else under the Law. We are all sinners and unable to help ourselves.

God acted again. He sent His Son to end the slavery of works and the sin that was part of it. He sent His Son Jesus as a human to teach and demonstrate the fundamental

relationships of love that God had intended with the Covenant He had given to Moses.

Jesus came and fulfilled all the God-given Law and covenants of the Old Testament. Then, He established the last covenant. Anyone who believed in Jesus, who followed Him, and trusted in His work would receive the ultimate covenants to end all covenants. That was the promise of living with Him forever.

Though we might want to call this major covenant a conditional one because we might think we come to Jesus, it is not that way. God calls us. So the covenant is unconditional. We receive it by the power of the Holy Spirit, and it is ours.

Yet, some people still act as though they fall under Moses's covenant. They think there are specific man-made rules that must be followed to receive grace. Some people in some churches follow the Old Testament practice of excluding others and forming small in-groups in their churches which causes people to feel unwanted and on the outside. Relationships break down into those who are better because of what they do and those who are not as good because of what they don't do.

Despite the covenant of Jesus and His commandment to love God and love each other, people are cruel and demeaning to each other even in the relational community of God. Some want glory and honor for their contributions like the Pharisees did during Jesus' time. Some treat their fellow sinners as worse than they are because their sin is greater. That is contrary to the notion that all sin is sin. No sin is greater or lesser and no sinner is greater or lesser for his sin.

Jesus demonstrated how we are to treat those who are seen as outsiders. Outsiders are defined as such because of their behavior or because of their faith. The Samaritans were despised by the Jews and viewed as half-breed Jews. How was that showing love? In His discourse with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus showed us how to love those who are not like us. In His parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus showed that love for our neighbor is not limited to our spiritual neighbors. Saint Paul tells us there is no Jew or Greek, no rich or poor, no poor or slave. We are all sinners and we are all saved by the grace of God through faith in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The last covenant that Jesus gave replaced many of the covenantal relationships of God's people. God sent Jesus to renew the relationship between Himself and His creatures, humans. He sent Jesus to end the unending slavery to rules created by men and still followed by many Jewish people today. As a Jew, He demonstrated how to love other Jews who were despised by His people. The relationships between God and man and between each of us and each other of us is through Jesus.

How does this in any way apply to a mission statement in a church in Northern Virginia? It applies not as words on paper but as actions in a relationship.

It shows in a welcoming and open church that enjoys the relationship of everyone who comes to it. It shows in warm relationships that are loving and Christ-like. It is a church that does not form in-group and out-group relations based upon any superficial human criteria, but uplifts each of the people of God as they praise, thank, honor, and serve God

with their time, talents, and treasure. It is a church that purposely seeks out those who want to be a part of a loving Christ-like body of believers just as Jesus demonstrated in His seeking out of Zaccheus who was viewed with disdain by others but who became a follower of Jesus. It is seen in a church in which the people of God live by the Word of God and demonstrate the love of Christ. A church where members are not called hypocrites because they talk the Christ-like talk but then, do not walk the Christ-walk in the world around them.

Such is the Church which Jesus leads. Such is the church that demonstrates loving relationships between God and His people and between and among His people. Such is the church that fulfills the will of God in making believers of others. Such is the church we should want to be. Such is the church we should work to become so that the Mission Statement of Our Savior's Way is a mirror of Our Savior and His Way in all we are and in all we do to the glory of God.

How can you help do that starting today?

Amen.