

Eliminating Relational Poison

Press On Series, October 17/18 | Philippians 2:12-18

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BREAKUPS CAN BE DEVASTATING.

The Beatles' breakup in 1970 devastated some people.

Trouble had been brewing for years.

The band was wracked by creative differences. Paul McCartney saw a dark side in John Lennon, and Lennon thought that McCartney wrote shallow little ditties.

There were backroom power struggles, management problems, and massive financial issues.

Band members struggled with drug use, spiritual questions, family issues, and mental health.

To keep George Harrison in the band, they had stopped touring and playing live concerts.

And then there was Yoko Ono, John Lennon's artist girlfriend.

Every member of The Beatles had quit at some point except Paul.

Then, in April of 1970, Paul McCartney was asked in an interview if he planned to do any new music with the Beatles. He simply responded "No." The band was finished.ⁱ

Have you ever gone through a rough breakup?

The Beatles experienced the breakup of a band. Has a team of yours ever broken up?

When we hear the word "breakup," we naturally think of dating relationships. Have you experienced the breakup of a dating relationship? How about a marriage? Those are crushing.

Probably all of us have experienced the breakup of a friendship. Those hurt, too.

And some of us have experienced the breakup of a family relationship. Those hurt for years.

Breakups remind us that relationships can go very badly.

Relationships are important to us, even the most solitary among us.

We long for good relationships in our lives. We want relationships that last and fuel us.

That means that we need to think about the people we relate to. It is critical that we build relationships with non-Christians, because we love them in Jesus' name and want to bring Christ to them. At the same time, there are times when we simply need other Christians around us. Why? Because Christian relationships are supposed to be different.

We also need to think about how we behave in our relationships, because there are ways in which we can tear those relationships down and ways in which we can build them up. We have to act like Christians if we want to have Christian relationships!

And strong, Christian relationships are critical, because those are the relationships that can and should help us follow Jesus and press on.

So how do we get right relationships, particularly with other Christians? Paul addressed that concern in Philippians, chapter 2.

RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS REQUIRE SANCTIFICATION.

In Philippians 2:12-13, the Apostle Paul reminded us that right relationships require sanctification.

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Beginning with the word “therefore,” Paul reminds us that he was looking back.

He was specifically looking back to the picture of Jesus he painted in verses 6-11. As we said last week, Jesus was God but he emptied himself, became a human, and submitted to death on a cross.

Paul wanted us to get that same mindset for ourselves. He advocated that we think and act like Jesus. If we were to think and act like Jesus, we would set aside selfish ambition and conceit. We would be humble and serve. We would put the needs of others before our own needs.

“Since all of that is true,” Paul wrote, “now this is what I want you to do next.”

Paul who wrote to the saints in Philippi about relationships had a relationship with them.

He called the saints in Philippi his beloved.

He reminded them that they had obeyed him frequently in the past, when he had been able to be present with them.

But now, he was in prison in Rome, so he couldn’t be with them face to face. Even though he was physically absent, he still expected them to do what he asked.

Paul wanted the saints in Philippi to work out their salvation.

In the past, Paul had helped them to work out their salvation himself in person.

In the future, the saints in Philippi might not have Paul’s personal visits to rely upon. Instead, with Paul absent, they would need to take responsibility for the process themselves.

To do so with fear and trembling simply meant that they were to take the task seriously, instead of treating it as an afterthought. Plus, it would be God himself working in the saints in Philippi who would work out their salvation.

This doesn’t mean that we can be less saved one day and more saved the next.

Instead, this is the same process that Paul described earlier in Philippians 1:6 when he wrote,

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

This is “sanctification,” the process whereby God who has saved us makes us holy over time.

Salvation happens in an instant. Sanctification takes a lifetime.

Working out our salvation or “sanctification” reminds us that we are all like sculptures God is carving.

Michelangelo, the great sculptor and painter of the Renaissance, was an unusual artist.

It wasn’t just his talent that set him apart. It was his approach to art.

He once wrote about his sculptures, "In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it."

Hence, Michelangelo didn't exactly create statues. You might say that he revealed them, one chisel mark and bit of stone at a time.

This picture is "The Atlas." It's somewhat unfinished and reveals how Michelangelo approached every statue. You can literally see the figure coming out of this piece of marble.

It reminds me of the way God goes about sanctifying us or working out our salvation.

We start out like a great block of unformed marble.

Hidden inside the block of marble is the image of Jesus, waiting to be set free.

As he sanctifies us, God chisels away our sin and what doesn't fit until the image of Jesus is left.

As we think about God's sanctifying us for relationships, we have to start with the assumption that God has a lot of work to do on us!

We start out as sinful people with sinful tendencies that can wreck relationships. God has a lot of chiseling away to do over time for us to be ready for right relationships.

And we probably need to approach all of our relationships with the humility to assume that we still have room to grow, places that need to be sanctified, and ways in which we need God to work out our salvation while we fear and tremble! Relationships are serious stuff, and we are seriously broken when we start!

RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS ARE BUILT ON HEALTHY PRACTICES.

In Philippians 2:14, Paul advocated that we avoid some very unhealthy practices in relationships.

Do all things without grumbling or disputing ...

Paul warned us against some specific, unhealthy practices in relationships.

Paul used a form of the Greek word "gongismos" which sounds like grumbling. It means the general sense of dissatisfaction that leads us to complain to one another. Paul told us to avoid grumbling.

Paul also told us to avoid disputing. It comes from a Greek word which means settling things through words. Endless words. Paul is implying that disputing means talking, saying what we're unhappy about, and continuing to talk until we get what we want.

Paul was implying that both grumbling and disputing were going on in the church in Philippi.

Paul was calling them out and calling on them to stop grumbling and disputing.

Paul was also talking to us. There are some things that we just can't do if we want to have right relationships, some things that are unhealthy and destroy relationships inside the church. He wants us to avoid grumbling and disputing, because they poison relationships.

As we saw last week, Jesus advocated for a different set of healthy practices in relationships.

Paul cited Jesus' whole way of thinking and acting as a template for us.

Jesus' words were just as unexpected, though. In Matthew 5:43-44 Jesus said:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ..."

Then Jesus added in Matthew 5:45 what would happen if we followed his instructions:

"... so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. ..." Clearly, Jesus thought that our relationships matter, because treating people right reveals us as children of God.

Then he clarified what he found to be the real perspective that would lead to healthy relationships in Matthew 5:48,

"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Jesus set the bar high and told us to pursue right relationships based on healthy, godly practices.

Are your relationships built on healthy practices?

Paul told us to avoid unhealthy practices like grumbling and disputing.

What, then, are the healthy practices that contribute to right relationships?

Let's start simply by turning around the unhealthy practices Paul discourages.

Turn around grumbling, and we get gratitude. If we're grateful for the people around us, then it's difficult to let dissatisfaction and complaining take root.

Turn around disputing, and we get listening. Disputing is my trying to get my own way, which is the exact opposite of everything Paul wrote about Jesus and the Church in Philippians 2:1-11. Listening may not solve all the problems that disputing creates for us, but it's a really good place to start.

Are our relationships built on healthy practices like expressing gratitude and listening?

Let's be honest with ourselves here. We all have a tendency to think that our relationships are what they are because of other people. We tend to think that our broken relationships are broken because other people broke them. We tend to think that our strained relationships are strained because other people have done unhealthy, unhelpful, ungodly things that have strained them.

But we have to take responsibility for the part we play in our relationships and for the things we have done to build and tear down those relationships.

We started out broken, and while God is sanctifying us, he is still working on us and still has work to do. That means that, in all likelihood, some of our actions are right, and some of them are wrong. We can't blame all of our broken relationships on other people.

So let me ask you again, Are our relationships built on healthy practices?

Is there any unhealthy thing you've done in a relationship that you need to make right?

And is there any healthy thing you need to do going forward?

RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS CAUSE US TO STAND OUT.

In Philippians 2:15, Paul told what will happen if we do everything without grumbling or disputing.

... that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world ...

Let's tackle this verse one clause at a time.

We will be blameless and innocent, children of God who are without blemish.

Paul makes four claims here.

One stands out, and we have studied this kind of claim already. Paul says that we are children of God. We know that when we become followers of Jesus, we are adopted as children of God. That's a fact, and our conduct doesn't make us children of God or not. However, when we do everything without grumbling or disputing, we show that we are in reality children of God.

So then, the other three terms Paul used modify or describe the kinds of children of God we are, if we avoid grumbling and disputing. These terms actually build on one another.

First, Paul calls us "blameless." If we avoid grumbling and disputing, then we are free of guilt.

Second, Paul calls us "innocent." If we avoid grumbling and disputing, then we are pure, we have stood in the face of evil, and we are ritually clean.

Third, Paul opens up the possibility that we might be "without blemish." This is the highest term Paul used for us. To say that we are "without blemish" is a ritual term meaning that we are without moral or physical defects. It's the kind of term the Old Testament used for an animal that was being offered to God. Only the animals that were "without blemish" could be offered to God. So, if we grumble and dispute, obviously we put an unacceptable blemish on ourselves. That's the bad news. But if we avoid grumbling and disputing, we are without blemish. We are suitable to come before God or to be offered to God.¹

We will stand in stark contrast to a crooked and twisted generation.

Paul picked up language that Moses used in the Old Testament to describe the Israelites when they grumbled and complained and that Jesus himself used in the New Testament to describe the stubborn world around him.

Paul called this generation crooked: it's misshapen, dishonest, and immoral.

He called this generation twisted: it's perverted and morally wrong.

Paul really hit the mark here, and we all know it. These are dark days.

Right now, I'm not talking about the crises we face.

I'm not even talking about the honesty and morality issues that our society faces.

Those things make these days dark, but these days are made all the darker by the ways in which people talk about them. We're shouting at each other instead of listening. We're stomping our feet, shaking our fists, and demanding our way like toddlers throwing temper tantrums.

Volumes of articles are being written right now about how divided our nation is.

I don't know if it's dawning on any of us yet what damage that kind of shouting does to our networks of friends. And I can't imagine any of us are really aware of the damage we're doing to our extended families as we shout at each other. But, with Paul, what I really worry about the most is what damage we may be doing to the Church when we Christians get involved and start shouting.

We are all stressed. We are all experiencing pain. We are all at least a little bit afraid. And that's a toxic combination, brothers and sisters. It makes for a crooked and twisted generation.

But listen to what Paul was really writing. He was writing to people like us who were going through some relational stresses. He contrasted them with the crooked and twisted generation around them

¹ Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W. (1985). [*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*](#) (p. 619). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

and called them to rise above it! That's what he's saying to us as well! He wants us to jettison the relational poison that we've allowed to seep inside of us. Why? Because when we do...

We will shine as lights in the world/cosmos.

Paul called us to be light.

Jesus himself told us that we are light and that our light is supposed to shine in this dark, twisted world. In Matthew 5:14-16 he said,

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Our conduct is supposed to be so different that it stands in stark contrast to the world around us. We aren't supposed to be like them, act like them, talk like them, get panicked like them, or even fight like them. Instead, our conduct and words are supposed to stand as a testimony to them. And that testimony is supposed to point them to Jesus and give them hope.

Right here, Paul was as evocative as he could be.

To say that we are to shine like lights in the world captures the rigid word-for-word sense of what Paul wrote, if you're trying to be rigid and minimalistic about it.

But if you let your heart into the translation process along with your head, what Paul was really saying is that if we avoid grumbling and disputing, we will shine like stars in the dark night sky.

Will we be the light?

The world around us is hurting, and hopeless, and in desperate need of Jesus.

This is the moment for us as Christians to set the example for the world around us by our speech and by the ways that we treat people.

And this is the moment for us as Christians to stand united with one another even if that means pushing past our fear, our own opinions, and our worries, because the world around us needs to see Jesus in us.

Will we shine like a blazing supernova in the dark night sky?

Or will we become the darkness ourselves?

RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS HELP US PRESS ON.

In Philippians 2:16-18, Paul told the saints in Philippi that their right relationships would help him to press on.

... holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

Right relationships in Philippi would help Paul to press on.

Paul described his own journey to the saints of Philippi like running a race.

Paul, as you may remember from our previous studies, was living through some dark days himself. He was in prison, on trial for his Christian faith, waiting for judgment that could lead to his death. Paul knew what it was like to live in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation.

The race he was running through these dark days was the race to live faithfully and end without compromise.

If the saints in Philippi could avoid grumbling and disputing, Paul would face Jesus knowing that his life had mattered. That gave him the strength to press on.

Then he closed this section with a beautiful picture in verses 17-18. He returned to the idea of his own possible impending death.

Then Paul thought about the daily sacrifices on the altar at the Temple in Jerusalem. Every morning in Jerusalem they offered an animal in the morning and an animal in the evening. Along with the animal, they offered some grain. Along with the grain, the priest would pour out a drink offering. It would all be burned together as an act of worship to God.

He wrote that if the saints in Philippi could avoid grumbling and disputing, they would be living their lives like a sacrifice of faith to God. They were like the animal being offered morning and evening, every day in Jerusalem. And his death would be like the drink offering being poured over it all.ⁱⁱ

It would be beautiful together--their lives, his death, all a cause to rejoice, because it mattered.

Don't give yourself a pass on this issue.

Paul already wrote in Philippians 2 that getting rid of the poison that infects our relationships was a matter of thinking and acting like Jesus. If we don't get rid of the poison that infects our relationships, we can't say that we're thinking or acting like Jesus.

What we see today is that Paul also calls this a matter of our salvation working its way into our lives. If we are being sanctified at all, then it is going to touch the ways we use our words and the ways we relate to one another.

Paul even staked the meaning of his life and death on the saints in Philippi getting this one right. Why? Because everything hinged on it. If they couldn't set aside grumbling and disputing, then it didn't matter how much they knew about God or believed about God; their faith would be powerless. And if they couldn't set aside grumbling and disputing, then their mission to the world would never go anywhere, and the movement would fizzle. Paul's life's work and his death would have been for nothing.

This is too important. Don't give yourself a pass on this issue today.

Instead, press in on this issue.

Ask yourself, "Do I grumble and dispute?" If you do, then it's time to repent and change.

Ask yourself, "Are the relationships in my life right?" If not, then it's time to make them right.

And ask yourself, "Have I allowed poison into my heart?" If you have, then it's time to get it out.

ⁱ "Why the Beatles Split" by Mark Beaumont, April 8, 2020 for *The Independent*: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/beatles-split-break-john-lennon-yoko-ono-paul-mccartney-let-it-be-a9450096.html>.

ⁱⁱ Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W. (1985). *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (p. 1065). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.