

A Biblical Perspective of Relationships

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- *What would a perfect relationship be like?*
- *How can I know if I'm in a bad relationship?*
- *Can a bad relationship become a good relationship?*

What Is a Relationship?

The dictionary defines a “relationship” as “... the quality or state of being related; connection” and relation as “a person connected with another or others by blood, marriage, etc.” [“Webster’s,” 1999, p. 1209].

So when applied to people, a relationship is a connection which results in our belonging together in some unique recognizable way. In brief, a relationship is a significant connection which results in mutual identification. In other words--

If we have a relationship, we have some vested interest in each other.

The Nature of a Perfect Relationship

There is one perfect relationship which can be easily observed in the Bible--that of God the Father with God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Here are three principles that can be derived from a study of that relationship as described in John 17. [It would be best to read John 17 before reading my observations. Then see if you agree, disagree, or can add others.]

(1) A perfect relationship is based on giving, expecting nothing in return (verses 2, 6-8, 24). The word give occurs 18 times in John 17. Notice: (a) Jesus makes requests not based on what He has given the Father but what the Father has given Him. (b) There is no expectation that Jesus will give something back to the Father, but (c) His requests are consistent with the nature of what He has already been given.

Swapping is not giving. I should give to those I love, not so they will give something back to me (even respect or affection) but so they will be motivated to ask for even more of the same sort of gift which I have given. If I don't want them to ask for more, then my gift was probably not appropriate. For example, giving time, wisdom, or biblical maturity may have a different motive than giving money or things.

(2) A perfect relationship is based on knowledge (verses 1-3, 17). What makes a relationship so difficult is that we have to know something about each other. This is why many people find dating much easier than marriage.

Romance does not require a relationship

We can fall sexually/romantically in love with a picture in a magazine. We can fall sexually/romantically in love with an idea in a novel or one we make up ourselves. Romance, as generally defined (“falling in love”), requires very little knowledge. Marriage, on the other hand, requires an immense amount of knowledge. Jesus, being God, already knew God the Father, but concerning His disciples, He prayed, *and this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent* (verse 3, emphasis mine). By the way, do you define eternal life that way?

(3) A perfect relationship is based upon submission (verse 4). Jesus was in complete submission to the Father, even though both of them were God. Jesus said, *I...accomplished the work You [the Father] gave Me [the Son] to do*. This was not some mutual decision about what was to be done but work given by the Father to be done by the Son.

There is no such thing as mutual submission

In Ephesians 5:21, Paul said, be subject to one another because relationships require submission. But he did not define that as two-way but one-way. His examples are wives to husbands (5:22), the church to Christ (5:22-23), children to parents (6:1-3), and slaves to masters (6:5-8). In any positive relationship, someone will always be in submission to someone else. Sometimes submission changes with circumstances, sometimes it doesn't. If I'm riding with you in your car, I'm in submission to you. If you are taking a class from me, you are in submission to me. But I am always to be in submission to Christ, to my elders if I am younger, to a husband if I'm a wife, or to parents if I'm a child (*see also* Ruth 1:16, 1 Peter 3:1-6, and Esther 4:14). Of course, submission should stop at the point where the head requires the submitting person to disobey God--but then so does the relationship.

Evidence of a BAD Relationship

A bad relationship is one which encourages sin. Biblically, good relationships are not measured by intimacy or harmony (not that these things are bad) but by conformity to the Word of God. Demons seem to have a close relationship, Ananias and Sapphira seemed to have a close relationship (Acts 5:1-10), and Solomon seemed to have a close (loving) relationship with his foreign wives (1 Kings 11:1-4).

According to God, Ahab and Jezebel had a bad relationship. But they also had a close (intimate and harmonious) relationship (1 Kings 16:31-33; 19:1; 21:4, 5, 25). They were religiously active together, politically involved together, sensitive to having open communication with each other, in tune with each other's emotional needs, and encouraging of each other's dreams. One gets the impression they would be a model marriage to a modern counselor. But God disagreed (1 Kings 21:25) because of their sin. So biblically, bad relationships are those which lead one another to sin not those which are disharmonious. In 1 Corinthians 5, the church had a harmonious bad relationship with an unrepentant adulterer. Paul injected disharmony via excommunication in order to allow for the possibility of a good relationship via repentance.

How Can a BAD Relationship Become a GOOD Relationship?

(1) Good relationships come from the intent of the heart. In Genesis we read that, except for Noah and his family, God gave up on His relationship with everybody on earth because...*every intent of the thoughts of his [man's] heart was only evil continually* (6:5). Through Isaiah, God said of Israel, ... *this people... honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me* (29:13).

Bad relationships require a change of heart.

(2) Good relationships depend on repentance and forgiveness. Since we are all sinners, we must always be sensitive to repent of our sin against God and our wrong done to each other. Pride is the enemy of good relationships and must be put aside if a bad relationship is to become a good one. "I'm sorry, but..." "He (she) needs to change..." or "What about me?" will never restore a bad relationship.

Bad relationships become good only with repentance and forgiveness.

(3) Good relationships depend on love, defined as giving, which does the best possible good for the other person (John 3:16, 1 Corinthians 13). Love does not necessarily give someone what they want but what is the best possible good for them. It is not necessarily loving to treat a husband or wife the way they want to be treated or to give a child or parent or friend what they ask for. Giving such things may generate feelings of intimacy (usually short-lived, good only until the want returns with some other desire). But loving-giving looks for what's the best for the other person, then presents it in a way which is patient, kind, not jealous, not bragging, not arrogant, not unbecoming, not self-seeking, not provoking, not taking into account a wrong suffered, or unrighteously. Instead, it *bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things* (1 Corinthians 13:1-7).

Bad relationships only become good relationships applying this definition of loving giving.

(4) Good relationships require voluntary regular ongoing conversation. I think most would agree that of the 12 disciples, Jesus had the closest relationship with Peter. The most obvious characteristic about Peter is not that he was the most correct student but that he talked a lot. He was usually the first to ask a question, make a comment, or offer an objection or opinion (Matthew 14:25-30; 15:15; 16:16; 17:4).

Bad relationships only become good with ongoing conversation.

Questions and Answers

Q: *What would a perfect relationship be like?*

A: It would be like the one between Christ and God the Father--based on giving, knowledge, and submission.

Q: *How can I know if I'm in a bad relationship?*

A: A bad relationship is where people encourage one another to disobey the Word of God. Harmony (like, say, between fornicators, adulterers, homosexuals, sinful couples, partners in crime, or false religion) may encourage intimacy, yet lead to sin and hence be a biblically bad relationship.

Q: *Can a bad relationship become a good relationship?*

A: Bad relationships can become good ones only when both parties are capable of (1) changing the intent of their heart, (2) exchanging pride for repentance, and (3) defining love as giving the best good to the other, expecting nothing in return.