

The Secret to Healthy Relationships

In a world dominated by hatred and conflict, successful long-term relationships seem elusive. But it's not that hard, once we understand the key ingredient.

“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself” (Phil. 2:3).



When we experience a painful relationship breakup, it's normal to evaluate what went wrong. Who was at fault? What were the underlying issues? How could we have avoided this sad outcome? Or were the parties involved so hopelessly incompatible that a rupture was inevitable? Why is this so hard?

In this short verse, Paul lays bare the root problem that lies at the heart of every relationship dysfunction, whether in a marriage, a friendship, a church, or a society. If we're serious about fixing our problems with others, this verse is a good place to start.

Notice that Paul addresses the problem from two directions: first, he describes the *faulty attitude* that undermines relationships; then he offers the *positive alternative* that nurtures healthy relationships. Let's address each in turn.

Two words summarize the natural motivation that renders social connections so difficult to maintain: “selfish ambition” (or “rivalry,” ESV, HCSV) and “conceit.” The New Century Version renders the first half of this verse, “do not let selfishness or pride be

your guide.” A heart that is guided largely by its own selfish interests will always struggle to appreciate the perspectives of others—and will treat them accordingly. It is this consuming desire to always be right, to be first, to be superior to others, that throws up barriers between ourselves and those around us. No relationship can survive in an environment of prideful me-first-ism.

The preferred alternative, Paul argues, is to maintain a “lowliness of mind [that] esteems others better than himself.” This does not mean that we belittle or denigrate ourselves (“I'm so worthless...Poor, pitiful me,” etc.). Rather, as the NIV renders it, we should “in humility value others above yourselves.” We ought to be comfortable in our own skin; that's not the issue. The greater question is how we view the other people in our lives. Paul insists that we should see all the people in our lives as opportunities for service. We value their needs as more important than our own and will go out of our way to sacrifice our interests for theirs.

When we train our minds to think in this “others-first” paradigm, our relationships take on an entirely different character. No longer will we look at the people in our lives as tools to be used for our personal benefit, but as objects of love to be served and cared for. We were designed for that purpose and experience our greatest happiness in fulfilling it. “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Ac. 20:35).

The secret to healthy relationships is really no secret at all. When husbands and wives learn to forgive the slights and injustices inflicted by each other and focus instead on what they can do for each other, marital squabbles will be few and minor. Churches—comprised of people from a wide variety of disparate backgrounds and interests—would be spared many of the painful disagreements and divisions that religion is too often known for.

So how do we train ourselves to purge out a spirit of pride and selfishness and replace it with a spirit of humility and service? It's not easy. But in the next few verses, Paul offers a helpful strategy: “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus...taking the form of a bondservant...He humbled Himself” (v. 5-8). The more we fill our hearts with the image of the One who sacrificed so much for us, the easier it will be to sacrifice for others. And our relationships will be happier for it.

— David King