Mending Broken Relationships
By Kyle Pope

In every human relationship, sadly there can be times when things happen that damage the trust, closeness, and love that once existed between people. Children who were once good friends may face the pain of rejection when one child decides another is not popular enough, and distances himself from the other to gain new friends. Two girls who were once best friends may face betrayal when one flirts with a boy the other likes, or says something bad to another person about the other. As adults couples that once did everything together may find that differences in childrearing, morals, politics, financial status, or even personality traits make it harder and harder to spend time with each other. Co-workers who once worked well together grow at odds when it becomes clear that the way either of them acts to their face is not how they have talked about the other to other co-workers. In families, brothers and sisters can face the same problems if favoritism, partiality, or unfair treatment create resentments. Competitiveness can wipe away any sense of mutual respect, cooperation, and brotherly love. Sin can compromise trust when lies, theft, substance abuse, sexual immorality, or denial of affection destroy relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, or brothers and sisters.

We might wish that in obedience to the gospel the shared faith and hope of salvation enjoyed by fellow Christians would prevent such worldly and destructive influences from harming relationships between Christians. Unfortunately, that is not the case. A brother can say something to a fellow Christian from the most sincere motives, and it be taken in a way that shatters relation-

ships. Past mistakes, or even sinful attitudes can create walls of mistrust that lead people who hope to spend eternity with one another in heaven to assume the very worst about each other, and spread their wicked assumptions to anyone who will listen. Harsh criticisms, exclusive associations, a refusal to ask, listen, and talk to one another when perceptions arise lead to a party spirit, a combative and defensive mentality resulting in division, discouragement, and in some cases the loss of souls—all among those who claim to love God! This shouldn't happen among God's people—but it does!

How should Christians handle such damaged relationships? What should be done? Depending on the relationship, and the nature of the problem, sometimes it may be good for some relationships to end. If I lose a friend because I refuse to participate in sin with him or her that may not be a bad thing (2 Cor. 6:14-17). If, on the other hand, the relationship has been compromised by my sin, or some unfortunate miscommunication or misunderstanding I must do all within my power to mend the relationship (Matt. 5:23-24). Whether we are talking about relationships between class-

mates, co-workers, family members, or members of a congregation what does the Bible teach about mending broken relationships?

1. We Must Desire to Mend the Relationship. Jesus taught that before acceptable worship can be offered to God, when we remember that someone has something against us, we must **"first, be reconciled to your brother"** (Matt. 5:23-24). Sometimes we grow comfortable with dysfunction. I used to have a Jeep that had a major problem with the steering column. You turned it a certain way and the wipers came on. If you turned it another way the horn would beep. I didn't want (or have the money) to repair it so I just adapted myself to driving with a dysfunctional vehicle. We sometimes do the same thing with relationships. Something is not what it should be, but we just settle in and get used to it. This is one thing is we have done all we can. We can't force others to do what they will not. The children of broken homes can't force parents to behave themselves and love one another. It is a different thing when we are talking about relationships in Christ. If you see that I am not what I ought to be and you do not act to correct my sin, I could be lost—but you could as well. God told Ezekiel that failing to warn his brethren to turn from sin could jeopardize his own soul (Ezek. 3:16-21). When a Christian becomes entangled in sin, other Christians are commanded to **"restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness"** (Gal. 6:1). We must firmly desire to mend what is broken whether it be within our souls or our relationships.

2. We Must Do the Hard Work of Communication. The consequences that resulted from the confusion of human languages at the Tower of Babel illustrate how vital good communication is to cooperative relationships (Gen. 11:1-9). Sometimes even when people speak the same language communication breaks down. We say something that is misunderstood. We say something that we should not have said. James said the tongue is **"an unruly evil, full of deadly poison."**(Jas. 3:8). Sometimes we hear a small portion of the information, but we don't hear everything that would give us a full picture. This may be part of why the Holy Spirit tells us to be **"swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath"** (Jas. 1:19). The wise man tells us, **"He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him"** (Prov. 18:13). Communication requires going to a person, asking questions, being willing to hear what the person says, working to understand, and if sin is a factor we must be willing to rebuke sin in others, and correct sin in ourselves (Matt. 7:5). This

is not easy. It takes hard work, but no relationship can be healed without good communication.

3. We Must Refuse to Gossip and Backbite.

The Bible has a great deal to say about the danger of gossip and backbiting. Those given over to a **"debased mind"** are **"whisperers"** and **"backbiters"** (Rom. 1:28-30). The godly should **"turn away"** from those who are **"slanderers"** (2 Tim. 3:5). **"Revilers"** will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:10). We may be condemned if we **"grumble"** against one another (Jas. 5:9). When relationships are broken this sin even further compromises any hopes of reconciliation. Often we cloak this in the guise of consolation or even closeness to others, but when gossip and backbiting become a substitute for communicating with the person who is the subject of our gossip it is not constructive but a factor that further erodes the relationship. The wise man said, **"he who repeats a matter separates friends"** (Prov. 17:9). If I truly want to mend a broken relationship between me and another person I need to tell myself "I am going to stop talking bad about that person to anyone else," especially if I am unwilling to go and talk to the person about what bothers me (see Matt. 18:15-17).

4. We Must Stop Assuming the Worst About Others.

In the twisted paranoia of king Saul, although David was in truth one of his most loyal supporters, he came to see in David's every action the steps of treason and betrayal (cf. 1 Sam. 24:1-22). How does it effect us when it comes to our attention that someone else has looked at our behavior in a certain situation, weighed all the possible causes, reasons, motives, or attitudes that could have been involved in a certain scenario and assumed the very worst about us? It hurts! Did they ask us about it before making this assumption? Did they give us the benefit of the doubt? No, they just assumed we are the kind of wicked person that behaves in the worst way possible. What does that do to relationships? It shatters them. Paul taught that true love **"thinks no evil"** but instead **"believes all things"** and **"hopes all things"** (1 Cor. 13:1-7). Sometimes people actually do the worst thing possible, because sometimes people sin, but what should the responsibility of a Christian be even if that is what has happened? We should try and bring them out of that sin. Remember Paul's charge to **"restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness"** (Gal. 6:1)? We must hope for the best, and only when all information is truly provided believe the worst. If the worst is in fact what happened, we must snatch a brother or sister out of the fires of sin—**"pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh"** (Jude 23). We don't hate them. We don't take delight in their peril or rally allies to oppose them. We hate the fact that sin has defiled our brother or sister and we refuse to grant it the victory.

5. We Must Work to Re-establish Trust.

Jesus taught the challenging doctrine **"If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him"** (Luke 17:3-4). In the earliest days of my preaching work I studied with a Christian couple whose marriage had been shattered by the fact that the husband had committed adultery. While the wife was within her rights to put him away (Matt. 5:32; 19:9), she chose to work to reconcile the relationship. One of the biggest obstacles for them to overcome was how to repair the trust that had been lost. Particularly in matters of intimacy, she was not sure she could ever feel comfortable to let her guard down again.

The process was slow. Little by little trust had to be reestablished. He had to show that, in spite of his past sins, he could be trusted in the future. After a time even the closeness of intimacy was renewed when trust was regained. Broken relationships often result in parties on both sides losing trust for the other. Relationships can never be healed until some measure of trust is restored. This may take time. It is not an easy process, but an atmosphere of mistrust can never foster harmony. I may have to be the one who first chooses to trust, when a pattern of untrustworthy behavior has been demonstrated in the past. Even so, until action is taken to restore trust relationships will not be mended.

6. We Must Keep Up Regular Maintenance.
A governing principle of life in this universe is something scientists call *entropy*, which describes the fact that everything in the universe moves towards disorder. For example, you heap-up pile of dirt and unless you continue to re-pile it and shovel it back as it was it will gradually fall and disperse. You repair a car and it runs great, but unless it is maintained it will breakdown again. The same is true of relationships. We must keep up the necessary maintenance to sustain good relationships. Husbands and wives need to work to rekindle the spark that made them first love each other. This is illustrated in Christ's words to the church in Ephesus who had left their **"first love"** and were charged to **"repent and do the first works"** (Rev. 2:4-5). In God's relationship to Israel, He says of Himself **"I will allure her, will bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfort to her"** (Hos. 2:14). Friends, co-workers, family, and brethren in Christ need to take an active interest in one another to have good relationships. Paul commanded the Philippians **"Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others"** (Phil. 2:4). This takes spending time with each other. This takes getting to know one another. This takes trying to understand each other. We are to, **"Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep"** (Rom. 12:15). This takes not being too narrow in our expectations of others, but giving each other the freedom to be different and unique. It takes working to maintain a relationship with one another.

Conclusion. Often, one of the reasons that relationships are never repaired is because people don't believe that it is possible. Perhaps our own life or family experience makes us conclude that once damage has occurred the relationship just has to end. We must recognize that the very example of reconciliation back to God on the part of a lost sinner who can become a child of God is the ultimate example of mending a broken relationship. Paul declared, **"while we were still sinners Christ died for us"** explaining after this **"if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life"** (Rom. 5:8, 10). If God, in Christ was willing to reconcile a broken and tattered relationship that had developed between man and God in our sin, any human relationship can be healed. The question is simply will we follow God's example and do it, or not?