

IMPROVING RELATIONSHIPS

2 Corinthians 10:1-3, 15-18; 12:14-21

Several years ago a popular seminar series that was being marketed to businesses, industries and government organizations was called “Achieving Your Potential.” One of the main ideas of this program was that none of us has arrived, all of us have areas in which we can improve. In other words, we haven’t achieved our potential. We could argue that this is in line with what the Bible teaches in that our goal is that we are to become like Christ and that objective certainly gives all of us a lot of room for growth.

Of course, anytime we think about improvements in interpersonal relationships, we need to be careful to have the right motives and not resort to man-centered methods for accomplishing our objectives. Perhaps we can discover some biblically sound principles that can guide us if we have a situation that needs to be improved. Paul had a tremendous challenge with the church at Corinth and he attempted to make the relationship better in his second letter to them. The first thing we learn is that we cannot expect relationships to improve if we are not willing to approach the other person and address the issues. We also need to have a desirable outcome that both sides can endorse such as “what would be good for the Kingdom of God.” When we do address the issues that are at the heart of the problem, we need to take responsibility for any fault we may have and to clarify any misunderstanding. Finally, one or both sides may need to get their relationship with God back on track.

Approach Courageously: 10:1-3

¹Now I, Paul, myself urge you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am meek when face to face with you, but bold toward you when absent! ²I ask that when I am present I *need* not be bold with the confidence with which I propose to be courageous against some, who regard us as if we walked according to the flesh. ³For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, 2 Corinthians 10:1-3 (NASB95)

The critics of Paul were like the political stooges and pundits today. They jumped on anything and everything to find an opportunity to criticize and belittle the opposition. Apparently, Paul was not a large robust person. In fact, when he changed his name from Saul (which means *desirable*) to Paul (which means *small*) he was somewhat self-deprecating by acknowledging that he was not a big person physically. He might also have been acknowledging that he was the “least” of the apostles. The opponents used his name and his small physical frame to criticize him. They mistakenly assumed that his small physical size indicated that he was insignificant as person. They were quick to point out that he was not very forceful with the church when he was there, but his letters were very strong and demanding of proper action when was at a safe distance from them.

With that background, we can see that Paul approached improving the relationship with the church at Corinth by taking the very criticisms of the opposition and accepting the parts that were true and refuting the erroneous conclusions or interpretations of the facts. In the previous parts of this letter, Paul wrote about “our” message and about what “we” were doing. In chapter ten we see a shift to the first-person singular and he refers to himself rather than his ministry team. He did not deny his name and what it meant. He did not pretend to be something that he wasn’t. His appeal was not from an imposing personal appearance or a charismatic personality. He agreed with his critics that he was meek when he was in Corinth and also that he was very direct in his letters to them. It was almost as if Paul was saying – those things are **not** the issue. Even Christ was meek and gentle when he was among the people, but that did not make the message of salvation any less valid or powerful. Even though Christ was meek and gentle with

the people, He did not hesitate to drive the money changers from the Temple. We also know that the letters that Christ sent to the churches in Asia Minor (as recorded in John's Revelation) were very direct and stern.

The opponents and critics of Paul viewed him as someone who was just like they were. They were in the "ministry business" as a profession and they had gotten an education and they were able to present themselves in such a way to influence many in the church. They likely had good credentials, and were polished speakers. In other words they walked according to the flesh and they, mistakenly, thought Paul was operating in the same manner.

Paul argued that even though we are still occupants of a physical body, we have spiritual endowments as a result of being new creations in Christ. The battles we wage against the world, the flesh and the devil are not fought in the physical realm but in the spiritual realm. When we are dealing with spiritual issues (which is most of the time when there are relationship challenges), then we need to be using spiritual weapons that are effective in that realm. Paul was able and willing to use whatever means required to accomplish the objectives of the Kingdom of God. In the past, he had used meekness and gentleness and persuasion and now he (not so subtly) warned them that they did not want him to have to use other means on his next visit.

Challenge with God's Work: 10:15-18

¹⁵ not boasting beyond *our* measure, *that is*, in other men's labors, but with the hope that as your faith grows, we will be, within our sphere, enlarged even more by you, ¹⁶ so as to preach the gospel even to the regions beyond you, *and* not to boast in what has been accomplished in the sphere of another. ¹⁷ But HE WHO BOASTS IS TO BOAST IN THE LORD. ¹⁸ For it is not he who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends. 2 Cor 10:15-18 (NASB95)

If you want to improve relationships, common sense would tell us some negative things that we should avoid and some positive things we should emphasize. Just think about what others do that you find to be a "turn off" with regard to interpersonal relationships. The first thing that comes to mind is someone who is always telling me how great he is. Another thing is someone who takes credit for the accomplishments of others, especially if it was something you had done. You have probably encountered people who were just at the right place and the right time and something good happened and even though they did little or nothing to make it happen, took credit for being the key person what made it all happen.

This behavior was typical of things happening with the false teachers who had come to the Corinthian church. They did a lot of bragging on themselves and did a lot of comparisons of themselves with other false teachers. Their standard of comparison with other people was definitely the wrong basis. You see these kinds of comparisons happening today in sports, business and politics. People are concerned about whether someone went to the right school or had the right degree. It even creeps into churches and religious institutions. As it turns out, this practice is a common failing with almost every person. Most people think they are above average in every comparison you might choose to make.

On the positive side, it is always appropriate to recognize the contributions of others. A good place to start would be with those who have gone before us and laid a good foundation. A star quarterback is thought to be wise if he attributes his success to the good work of the linemen who protect him, to the receivers who make the great catches and to the coaches that guided and trained him throughout his life. The ultimate in recognizing the real Source of all our successes

is to realize that it is the Lord who enables and guides in all that we do. We will be successful to the extent that we follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit. The only thing that we should ever boast about is that we understand and know the Lord and what pleases Him (see Jeremiah 9:24).

The best commendation we can ever have is “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Most of us think of this as something that will be said in the Judgment, however, we can discover such commendations in this life. When God counts us faithful by providing ministry opportunities we should sense His approval. When we find that we are being tested because we are faithful to what God has called us to do, then we can know that He considers us worthy to be tried in the fire. When we see successes in life and realize that it was because we were just at the right place and right time and realize that the success came in spite of what we did, then we can know that God is blessing us.

Declare Any Concerns: 12:14-18

¹⁴Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you; for children are not responsible to save up for *their* parents, but parents for *their* children. ¹⁵I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? ¹⁶But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit. ¹⁷*Certainly I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I?* ¹⁸*I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him. Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit and walk in the same steps?* 2 Corinthians 12:14-18 (NASB95)

Sometimes we need to express our ongoing concerns if we expect a strained relationship to improve. Some people may think that is not a “Christian thing” to do. After all, aren’t we supposed to turn the other cheek and go the second mile? To tell another person about a concern that is hurting a relationship is not the same thing as retaliation or getting revenge. Admittedly, expressing a concern may cause the relationship to become more strained, initially. However, when it is done in an attitude of improvement rather than just being critical, then it can result in improvement rather than just having the relationship stagnate.

One of the things that seemed to bother Paul was the fact that he had declined to take any financial help from the Corinthian church and somehow they (with the help of the false teachers) had thought this was a trick Paul was pulling so he could take advantage of them sometime in the future or, perhaps, he was going to help himself to the contributions that were to be sent to the Christians at Jerusalem. This attitude of the Corinthians went beyond a “lack of appreciation” to an impugning of his motives.

Can you imagine how you would feel if you prepared a good healthy meal for a homeless, starving person at your own expense and after the person had eaten the meal, not only did he **not** say “thank you” but accused you of trying to poison him?

In his own defense, Paul assured them, that he was not interested in their money, but was concerned about them as persons. We can understand this type of selfless relationship when we consider how a parent normally feels about a child. A parent does not expect a child to be the “bread winner” for the family but realizes that parents are to provide for their children. It is a legitimate expectation that the child would appreciate what the parent does and realize that the motivation for the parent is his or her love for the child. It would also be a normal response for the child to love the parent in return. Paul observed that it seemed that the more he did for them, the less they loved him.

Seek to Strengthen: 12:19-21

¹⁹ All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. *Actually*, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ; and all for your upbuilding, beloved. ²⁰ For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps *there will be* strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances; ²¹ I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced. 2 Corinthians 12:19-21 (NASB95)

Sometimes when we are attempting to present the facts that relate to a relationship problem, the facts of the matter may be misinterpreted as bragging or making excuses. Throughout this letter we find that Paul repeatedly said “we are **not** commending ourselves.” Now, at this point in the letter he tried to assure the Corinthians that he is not “defending” his ministry team but is providing the information they needed to make the right decisions as to the direction their church was going to take. The phrase “in the sight of God” would be equivalent to the expression “with God as my witness.”

The problems that had plagued this church (strife, jealousy, immorality, etc.) had not been fully dealt with by the members or the church leaders. Paul was concerned that if those issues were still a problem, that his next visit was going to be difficult for him and for them. His desire was that those who were out of line in their behavior would repent or would be removed from the church fellowship so that his visit with them would be a time of celebration for a great victory. His fear was that no action would be taken and that he would be forced to deal with these issue and that would be very depressing for him.

Some of the church members were probably saying, “If Paul visits us again, he will just create more problems!” Paul made it clear that his desire was to *solve* problems and strengthen the church. Sins in the church must be faced honestly and dealt with courageously. To “sweep them under the rug” is to make matters worse. Sin in the church is like cancer in the human body: it must be cut out.

Relationship improvement must always be based on a sound foundation and not on just some superficial manipulations that simply puts a sugar coating over a festering wound. If there is a need for repentance that is causing a rift in the relationship, then we cannot just pretend that the problem is solved. We would hope that frank discussions of concerns, a challenge to do what would be pleasing to God and having the courage to confront the issue would lead to repentance and a restoration of relationships.