

The Remarkable Importance of Relationships

Matthew 18:15-20

by Linda McKinnish Bridges (some minor changes)

Relationships are important. Oh, we may minimize them and say, "It really doesn't matter how I relate to the person sitting next to me in the church pew or the one sitting at the desk next to mine at work." All that matters, we think, is that we do the job well, get home, feed the kids supper, help with homework, and then go to bed to start the day all over again tomorrow.

Low on the list of priorities is the bitter relationship that seems to never get mended at the office. Who has time to ponder the harsh words that were said between you and a fellow church member that resulted in a cold, awkward silence between you both? We have too much to do to stop and consider relationships—or do we?

Relationships are so important to Matthew, the evangelist, and to the congregation centered in Matthew's Gospel that detailed instructions are given in the event a relationship turns sour. If someone sins against you or treats you unjustly, you are instructed to go and confront the person. If there can be a

hearing, then you have gained a true friendship. If, however, the brother or sister who has offended you will not listen to you, then go again, taking one or two others as witnesses. And if the offender refuses to listen to them, then tell it to the church. And if the offender refuses to listen to the church, then let it rest. Let the offender be to you as "a Gentile or a tax collector" (two groups of people a good Jew would try to avoid).

What work! What energy! Why not just consider those who have wronged you as Gentiles and tax collectors from the beginning and bypass all of this running around? Why go to all this effort?

Because Jesus says that relationships are very important—that how we live together in this life has consequences.

According to the teachings of Christ, we cannot leave them alone. The principles are clear: confront the person, over and over again until the air is clear, wounds are healed, and the relationship has opportunity to build again.

And the mystery of all of this is that "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (v. 18).

I must confess that I do not know exactly what this verse means. Does it mean that the friend you have on earth will be the one you have in heaven, and likewise the earthly enemy will be your heavenly one? I don't think so. Looking at the passage in context gives us interpretive help. In verses 23-35 of chapter 18, the parable of the unforgiving servant is told to give us a vivid illustration of binding and loosing. Forgiveness releases and results in freedom. Unforgiveness binds and results in prison.

Could it be that forgiving relationships have so much redemptive value that one's destiny could be changed? Could the attention given to mending broken relationships actually result in someone, either an observer or the offender, being introduced to Kingdom life? Could the releasing of human hurt and pain incurred in earthly relationships actually prepare one to receive the heavenly forgiveness and redemption of God?

If so, then the opposite is also true. Lack of attention to those relationships can cause binding—a kind of imprisonment to self, to others, and to God. Little things have eternal consequences. Life is not really made by giving all our attention to the so-called big things, like job promotions, salary increases, and new houses. The good life, the life that matters, pays attention to the so-called little things—our relations with one another.

For it is there that we can see the power of God and find hope.

Let us pray...

Holy God,

you call us to righteousness and light.

Teach us the undivided law of love,

that we may love your children even as you do,

love you with all our will and strength,

and find our freedom in this blessed service,

taught to us in word and deed

by Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.