



## **7 Laws of Relationship**

### **What Are Your Priorities in Relationships?**

Several years ago when our oldest son was playing for his high school basketball team, I became a sort of cheerleader for the crowds that came to the games. I had the loudest voice apparently and started many chants that cheered the team on. Sometimes if it seemed too quiet, parents would motion to me to use my voice to get everyone involved in rooting for our team. Sometimes I used my big voice to express my displeasure with calls made by the referees that went against my son or his team. I don't think I really believed the referees paid any attention to me, especially since I was almost always sitting high up in the stands. One game however I was rather strong in my displeasure with several calls and when our team called a time-out, one of the referees walked over to the part of the stands where I was sitting and pointed his finger straight at me. He told me that if I didn't settle down, he would kick me out of the game. He said that in front of everyone. In front of my son's team. In front of all the parents who knew I was a pastor. It was rather humiliating. It is kind of sad to consider that I never would have yelled at him in that way if the two of us were in a coffee shop, if he was at my son's graduation or anywhere for that matter besides at that game. Why did I speak so disrespectfully to that man I did not even know? It is because I put him in a category. He was not to me at that point a normal human being, someone real or actual. He was instead a part of a category, in a box of generalizations and caricatures. He was a referee, so the normal sorts of human courtesies did not apply to him in my warped way of thinking. I was wrong.

It is mystifying why we do this, treat people in certain ways because they fit into some sort of category or typology. Racism is rooted in this, so is sexism and the modern fascination with celebrities. In an extended passage, James, the brother of Jesus makes a strong statement regarding discrimination and favoritism. **My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?** (James 2:1-7 NIV)

The key point James makes is that among God's people, favoritism is never acceptable. In fact, later he states powerfully, **But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.** (James 2:9 NIV) There is no equivocation here. You are wrong if you show any favoritism. Back in James's time, the line between the rich and poor was the most distinctive and recognizable wall separating people. It could be argued that the division between slaves and free was equally prominent, but James chose to use the rich/poor demarcation to make his point. He states that the outward signs of prosperity...clothes, jewelry, may tell you something about a person's affluence but not his or her heart. You are more likely to develop strong faith in God if you are poor and prone to be selfish and manipulative if you are rich. We know that there is a direct correlation between amount of wealth and level of giving to support churches and charity.

The richer people are, the less by percentage they give to churches or those in need. In addition, those who are poorer are more likely to be a part of God's kingdom and to have eternal life. This is not speculative; it is established by hard data which shows Christianity flourishes where the average income is less and withers at the highest levels of wealth. We can guess at why this might be but most importantly realize the point being made in Scripture. Wealth and poverty are not the most important part of us; it is our hearts and what sort of Christians we are if we are one at all.

There are seven laws of relationship that come out of James's forceful statement on how God's people are to treat each other. The basis behind each of them is developed throughout the Bible and they are foundational to life with others if you are serious about walking with God and making the most of your opportunity to represent Him everywhere. These can be divided into two distinct groupings which will make it helpful to remember and apply. **1. No one is an object for your use.** I am reminded of ancient Jacob who as he was making lentil soup was approached by his twin brother Esau, begging Jacob for some because he was famished. Jacob agreed to do so on one condition. Esau must give up his birthright as the older brother. We don't have time to get into all the benefits of having the birthright. Clearly they meant something to Jacob and not so much to Esau. What is most important is the mindset of Jacob. He did not see Esau as a person, certainly not as family. Esau was a pocket to pick, a fool to scam, an easy mark. Jacob was not concerned about how this would affect Esau later in life or what sort of lasting effect it would have on their relationship. He just wanted what Esau had and found a way to get it from him. You are not an object to use, you are a person of infinite worth to God and His people, someone to be loved and valued.

The next law of relationships is quite profound when taken seriously. **2. No one is subject to the boundaries you set for them.** There is a perfect example of this in Jesus' ministry. As Jesus was passing through Jericho, a tax collector was in the crowd who wanted to get a closer look at Jesus. He was faced with two obstacles. First he was too short to see over the crowd and second, he was too despised for anyone to let him work his way to the edge of the crowd. The only way Zacchaeus could get a peek at Jesus was by climbing the tree to get above the crowd. This man we all know was despised because he was a tax collector and all tax collectors got rich by cheating the villagers and demanding more taxes than they actually owed. Jesus paid no attention to the category Zacchaeus was assigned. **When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.** (Luke 19:5-6 NIV) People in the crowd grumbled though when they heard this. **All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" (Luke 19:7 NIV)** Zacchaeus famously rejected the restrictive boundaries the fine people of Jericho placed around him. Elated to be free of discrimination and prejudice, Zacchaeus made a stunning declaration of how it is not to be bound by emotional, psychological or spiritual constraints. **But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."** (Luke 19:8 NIV) It is amazing what is possible for those who refuse to be bound by the limitations others place on them!

Let us consider one more law of relationships and next week we shall look at the remaining four. **3. No One is too far gone for God to save.** If there was anyone who should have been written off by the Christian community as too far gone to save, it is the Apostle Paul. He had this to say about himself. **I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.** (Acts 22:4-5 NIV) There are all too many ready to call it quits on those they don't like, respect or value. They see no hope of some people ever changing. Perhaps many in Ukraine will carry their hatred of Russian people to the grave. There are drunks who have been rejected by their families, cheating spouses who have lost all the love they once enjoyed at home. Rapists and child molesters and thieves and corporate bosses are seen as hopeless cases. Yet, there is One who could say to all of us that he was the "worst of sinners" and be pretty

close to the truth and he still somehow made something good of his life when Jesus Christ got in him. You have never met someone who can't be completely turned around and made perfect when salvation comes.