

PUTTING THINGS IN

Perspective

Follow peace with all men, and holiness,
without which no man shall see the Lord.

Hebrews 12:14

Some years ago, after a routine visit to the doctor, my wife learned that she might be facing some serious health problems. One thing I remember from that day and the days following is how this troubling uncertainty affected our relationship. We had a good marriage—open communication, mutual respect, and lifelong love for each other—but during those days, we would sometimes just stop and hold each other. The realization of our frailty, our mortality, the shortness and uncertainty of our earthly lives had suddenly given us a different perspective of life and love.

In that stark light, we saw the value of our marriage and the priceless nature of our relationship with each other. Fortunately, we soon learned the symptoms were not what they first appeared to be. Further tests showed nothing abnormal. But we had been given a perspective from which to view and evaluate our marriage.

In this chapter, we will explore our relationships from a number of angles to try to put things in perspective. How should we view our relationships? How important are they? How are relationships maintained, and why do they fail? Furthermore, what premises do we have to explore this subject?

DOES IT MATTER?

We all have relationships. That is a given. But what kind of relationships do we have? Are they satisfying or empty? Are they superficial or deep? Do we generally get along with people, or is there a trail of conflict in our past? Should we get along with everyone? And most of all, does it really matter?

What does God think about human relationships? Do they matter to Him? Does He care when a husband and wife turn their backs on each other? When children sob in their bedrooms? When parents lie sleepless at night because of wayward children? When teenagers stomp out of the house? When in-laws feel left out?

Does it matter to God when church business meetings get tense? Is He concerned about how we talk to each other in the body of Christ? or how we talk *about* each other? Does it matter to God when members leave one congregation to go elsewhere because of church conflict? How does He view church splits?

When we start thinking about our relationships from God's perspective, we soon conclude they really do matter. How we get along with other people is clearly important to God. Many instructions in God's Word address our relationships—both how to build them and how to resolve problems.

Of course, other people are usually the problem. If they just wouldn't be so stubborn, opinionated, immature, carnal, worldly, conservative, quick-tempered, passive—the labels we give the “other side” go on and on. We easily assume that we

are balanced, wise, and spiritual. Otto Koning, missionary for many years in Papua New Guinea, quipped, “I could have been a good missionary if it hadn’t been for those ornery natives.”¹ How easily we assume that the troubles we encounter in our relationships stem from the other party.

Perspective! Although we agree that relationships are important, we easily disagree on the cause of our conflicts. We tend to view things through our own windows, the particular shading of our personal lenses. We find it hard to broaden perspective, and harder still to change our view, to look at issues through another person’s eyes.

WHAT IS OUR POINT OF REFERENCE?

To build a relationship or resolve a conflict, what is our reference point? Are there rules everyone agrees on? Do we have any authority, any judge, any teacher, any book that isn’t biased, to which we can appeal as objective and true?

The question is not merely philosophical or academic.

People are very interested in the subject of relationships. Seminars, college courses, degrees, personnel directors—all exist in the interest of interpersonal relationships. Company leaders know that employee relationships directly affect profits. One study concluded, “Most organizations waste two-thirds of their energy on internal bickering.”² Another researcher found that “only 26 percent of American employees consider themselves ‘engaged’ (loyal and productive), while 19 percent consider themselves ‘actively disengaged,’ (unhappy and spreading their discontent). If most employees were ‘engaged,’ productivity could more than double.”³

Experts who study human behavior and interaction rely on careful observation. They observe how people act and react. They group people into personality types and social classes and

other arbitrary groups. They provide studies, charts, and personality tests. They offer courses and workshops in human understanding and management.

So, do the experts provide for us that objective standard, that authority to which we can appeal in difficult relationships, that final decision about what is right and what is wrong?

Although we ought not summarily to discount all conclusions of experts, they don't provide what we really need, for two reasons. First, they are not an objective standard themselves. Most deny that such a thing even exists (although they can at times be ironically authoritative in their conclusions). The second reason we cannot completely trust the experts is that their standards for human behavior and interaction change. The latest study carries the day for a time, and then a new observation discounts the former or poses a totally different viewpoint.

Thousands of years ago, the Prophet Jeremiah said it well: "O LORD, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps" (Jeremiah 10:23). With due respect to the best thinking of man, we must conclude that we need more than human experts to guide us in relating to one another.

And we have more than man's thinking available to us. As we saw earlier, God cares about how human beings interact. Six of the Ten Commandments address human relationships. So let's be clear from the start. This study is not about human observations. As Christians we believe the Bible is the Word of God. It is true. Its descriptions of human beings are accurate. Its judgments are right. Its guidelines for human interaction are fully trustworthy. When we study the Bible, we are not looking at the best observations of man but at revelation from God.

“For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven” (Psalm 119:89).

“Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right” (v. 128). In other words, everything God says about anything is accurate and true.

This is my personal faith. I believe the Bible is the final authority. It is not wrong to consider the observations of man (as in the studies quoted earlier about productivity in the workplace). Indeed, we are encouraged to observe and learn. But God’s Word has the final say. What God has said is true and unchanging. It is the standard by which every idea, observation, or conclusion of man must be tested.

We need to settle this at the beginning of our study because sometimes we must choose between our best observation and what God has said. From our perspective, we may be convinced that the facts line up and the reasoning is flawless. But if it conflicts with God’s revelation, we can be sure we simply don’t have all the data. God is right. Every time.

Some decades ago, Dr. Spock released his child-training expertise to the public, declaring that spanking was damaging to children. A whole generation of parents followed his observations and conclusions. God’s Word says, “Foolishness is bound in the heart of the child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him” (Proverbs 22:15). From God’s Word, we conclude children have a bent to go their own way, and that spanking, properly applied, is a healthy and effective remedy.⁴

We now have the advantage of many years to weigh Dr. Spock’s advice. Has it produced better children or helped parents train their children more effectively? In reality, relational violations and relational pain (including domestic violence) have increased dramatically in the last forty years. Spock’s influence is certainly not the only factor contributing