



Improving Your Relationships

A Bible Study

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***“My command is this:
Love each other as I have loved you.
Greater love has no one than this:
to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”***

John 15:12-13

Getting along with all kinds of people under various circumstances is perhaps the greatest challenge we all face.

The Bible is full of practical advice and principles to help us improve our relationships.

I pray that this study will help you apply these biblical principles to your relationships and you will note great improvement!

Joyfully,

Mary

Mary Lowman

Table of Contents

Study and Objective Format	Page iv
Lesson 1 Biblical Principles for Relationships	Pages 1-12
Lesson 2 Dealing with Broken or Wounded Relationships	Pages 13-26
Lesson 3 Dealing with Difficult Relationships	Pages 27-44
Lesson 4 Covenant and Contractual Relationships	Pages 45-64
Lesson 5 Constructive Confrontation	Pages 65-85

Study Objective and Format

Before you jump into the study, I think it will be helpful to give a brief explanation of why I've designed this workbook the way it is. The course is very interactive—it is intended to get you involved as much as possible. If you had wanted to read a book, you would have bought a book instead of this study. So, I assume that you want something that helps you discover things for yourself and come to some conclusions on your own. Therefore, this study will ask you to look up scripture and paraphrase it, define terms, analyze attitudes, etc.

All quotations and passages are quoted from NIV (Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011). While it's possible to use other translations, you'll find it easier to follow if you use the NIV.

Another characteristic of this study is that it asks questions about you and gives you opportunities to make decisions.

The format gives you space to answer questions and write in your thoughts. I encourage you to do this, even though it may not seem necessary. I have learned that putting things in writing really crystallizes those ideas in my mind, especially when God is dealing with me. It will also help you to concentrate better.

However, what you do is between you and God, so if you skip some of the questions, that's no problem, at least not with me! If you think some part doesn't apply to you, then of course you're free to skip it and go to the next.

Lesson 3 – Dealing with Difficult Relationships

Review

As you focused on the broken or hurting relationships in your life since our last lesson, I hope you were able to take some beginning steps toward mending those relationships.

What did you find to be the most difficult part of trying to be reconciled?

What surprised you most about the other person's response to your initial approach?

Did you find yourself praying more about these broken or hurting relationships than you did before? That alone can make a big difference in moving toward reconciliation.

Obviously, restoring relationships is not a one-week effort, nor is it an easy thing to do. But don't lose heart and don't give up. Remember what the Apostle Paul tells us in Galatians 6:9: *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*

Introduction

In this lesson we will address some specific types of relationships that we encounter often, on our jobs. Whether your job is in your home or an office or factory or store or school, we all have jobs and those jobs bring relationship challenges. Mothers of young children who do their work at home have daily relationships with many people, including their children, other children and mothers, clerks in the stores, and on and on. Wherever you work, you have faced or will face some of the relationship challenges we address in this lesson.

When we go to a job outside our homes, we typically spend eight hours a day there with co-workers and peers whom we might never voluntarily choose to spend one-third of our waking hours each week. But there we are—together! And even though we're Christians, we're not immune to the irritations, aggravations, and outright conflicts that can exist in these relationships.

As I traveled across the country giving business seminars for many years, I got the same response from all types of people when I asked my classes what caused the greatest stress on their jobs. At the top of most everyone's list was something like “the people I work with” or “a co-worker who's driving me crazy” or “my impossible boss!”

Learning how to cope with these difficult working relationships is a key issue for Christians in the workplace because there's much more at stake than stress or productivity. These conflicts give us opportunities to demonstrate the power of Christ, to show that his presence makes a real difference in our everyday lives. As we find solutions to these conflicts through application of scripture, we establish a track record and testimony that cannot be discounted, because most people never find any answers for these interpersonal difficulties.

In considering how we should respond to these difficult relationships at work and elsewhere, let's look at some other biblical principles which would apply in many of these situations. Then we will see how they apply to specific types of relationships.

The “Extra-Mile” Principle

We are called to have an extra-mile attitude in our relationships with others. Matthew 5 is pretty clear about this. Fill in the following

blanks, beginning in verse 38:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'

*But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone _____
_____, turn
to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to _____ you
and take your _____, hand over _____
_____ as well. If someone forces you to _____
_____, go with them _____."*

What does it mean to have an extra-mile attitude, to turn the other cheek, to give your cloak as well as your shirt?

What is Jesus trying to teach us? Check the ones which you think are implied by his teaching here in Matthew 5:

- ☐ To endure unfair treatment at times, without griping or complaining
- ☐ To refrain from saying some of the things I would like to say to the difficult person
- ☐ To do some work I don't have to do or want to do
- ☐ To put in extra time and effort to help a difficult person
- ☐ To endure any kind of treatment
- ☐ To put up with unacceptable behavior or habits forever
- ☐ To never say anything negative to anyone

I believe that Jesus gave us boundaries with these "extra-mile" principles, and he definitely is not teaching us to become doormats or whipping posts.

However, do you think most Christians:

- ☐ go too many extra miles.
- ☐ don't go the extra mile as much as they should?

We certainly should find the right balance in our effort to go the extra mile, but don't become infected with the prevalent worldly attitude of "watching out for number one" and not doing anything you don't have

to do.

The “Speak-the-Truth-in-Love” Principle

Ephesians 4:1-16 deals with unity in the body of Christ and exhorts us to build each other up in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God so that we can become mature Christians. Please read Ephesians 4:1-16.

Did you ever realize that the people in your life are part of God's maturation plan for you? Without relationships—that sandpaper of our lives—none of us would become the mature people God wants us to be.

Notice particularly verses 14 and 15:

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead,

_____ , we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

The Apostle Paul is telling us that speaking the truth to people is sometimes the part we are called on to play in their lives in order to help them grow. Of course, the operative word here is “love.” Have you ever spoken the truth in:

- ☐ haste?
- ☐ anger?
- ☐ vindictiveness?
- ☐ hatred?
- ☐ malice?
- ☐ defensiveness?

You see, the truth can often be very painful. When we speak it in anything but love, we can open a door that never should be opened and cause a rift in a relationship that may never be healed.

Which would describe you best?

☐ I have difficulty speaking the truth in love even when I know I should.

If you checked this description, why do you find it difficult to speak the truth to a person for his or her own good?

☐ Because I hate confrontations.

☐ Because I fear rejection or repercussions.

☐ Because I feel guilty; after all, I'm not perfect either.

☐ I speak the truth too freely and often without compassion or forethought.

In practicing this biblical principle of speaking the truth in love, we must exercise extreme caution. Words are very powerful and need to be bathed in prayer. Our motivations must be carefully scrutinized to make certain that we are speaking the truth in love for the right reason at the right time. (Lesson 5 on confrontation goes into this in more detail.)

However, remember that speaking the truth in love is a biblical principle, and when God puts you in a position where you should do just that, to fail to do so is to rob that person of an opportunity to become more mature.

The “Love Your Enemy” Principle

Here is another principle from Matthew 5 that is helpful with difficult relationships—Matthew 5:43-45:

You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you: _____

_____ *and pray for those who* _____

_____, *that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*

How would you define a relationship “enemy”?

Enemies are people who make your life uncomfortable, difficult, cause unnecessary hurt or work or discord, and are generally at odds against you in many ways. They may not have overt intentions to do you harm, but if their manner or actions do indeed cause you harm, they are relationship enemies.

Jesus said, “Love your enemies....” What a revolutionary teaching this was. Never before had anyone taught such convoluted doctrine. It goes against all of our instincts to love our enemies. It demands an attitude that is foreign to our natures. It requires a denial of self which seems imminently unfair and all but impossible.

That's the way it often is with biblical principles. They go against our grain, and we feel as though it's mission impossible. But if God leads you to the “love your enemies” principle in dealing with difficult relationships, he will empower you to do it.

Can you remember a time when you were empowered by God's Spirit to love an enemy? Describe that situation:

Were you not more amazed than anyone else to discover that you had the power to love someone who was truly out to do you harm? Wasn't that an awesome feeling to realize that you just did what you thought you never could do?

Read Proverbs 25:21-22:

*If your enemy is hungry, _____
_____; if he is thirsty, _____
_____. In doing this, you will
heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you.*

What do you think wise Solomon meant by “you will heap burning coals on his head”?

In these two passages we see these principles about dealing with “enemies”:

1. Love your enemies.
2. Pray for your enemies.
3. Give your enemies what they need.

The result of this type of attitude toward a difficult person is that the Lord will reward you. We aren't promised that the person will change or that they will appreciate our kind reaction to their unkind actions. We aren't guaranteed that they will be repentant and ask for our forgiveness. But when we respond in loving ways toward difficult people, we keep ourselves from sinning and we demonstrate the love of Jesus in very real ways.

The “Humble Yourself” Principle

As we've been noting throughout this study, one of the many purposes of relationships is to teach us needed and important lessons. And humility is certainly an important lesson we can learn through difficult relationships.

Read Luke 14:11. Notice that Jesus exhorts us to humble ourselves.

For all those who _____ themselves will be _____, and those _____ will be _____.

Read 1 Peter 5:6:

_____, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

Remember the promises given to us in the two passages above when we truly are willing to humble ourselves. We will be lifted up and we will be exalted. Don't miss Peter's words that we will be lifted up “in

due time.” That’s probably not as soon as you would like it to be, but it will be in the right time after you have learned the valuable lesson of humbling yourself.

The “Put on Compassion” Principle

Read Colossians 3:12:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with _____, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Notice some important directions here: We, as God’s people, are to clothe ourselves with these characteristics. It is our choice, our decision whether or not we will wear compassion. We must be very intentional about putting on compassion.

What does it mean to be compassionate toward someone?

Remember that your reaction to that difficult person begins in your thought life. When you choose to put on compassion and react in a compassionate manner, you will be directing your thoughts in the right direction. Putting on compassion will empower you to react in the righteous way. (Your thought life is addressed in detail in a book I’ve written, *Think About What You Think About.*)

The “Speak Kind Words” Principle

Proverbs 12:25 says:

_____ weighs down the _____,
but a _____ cheers it up.

Proverbs 25:11:

A _____
_____ is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

“Fitly spoken” words are those which are strategically selected and

gently delivered. They are “fit,” they fit the situation perfectly. When you can find those “fit” words, you can change an ugly environment or situation into something beautiful—like “apples of gold in settings of silver.”

Don’t underestimate the power of your own words, and carefully select kind, positive words as a response. For example, with a negative person, your positive words not only may have a good effect on him or her, but they will also insulate your mind against the negativity so that you do not succumb and become negative yourself.

Now, let’s consider five specific kinds of relationships which we are likely to encounter and how these biblical principles apply in each of these relationships.

Dealing with the Lazy Person

One of the more common types of difficulties we encounter is the person who is lazy and doesn’t pull his or her share of the workload. Have you ever worked with someone who fits this description? What kind of reactions did that relationship generate in you—at least at times?

- ☐ Resentment
- ☐ Anger
- ☐ A desire to get even
- ☐ Less motivation to do your own work
- ☐ A tendency to talk about that person in derogatory ways
- ☐ A decision to do nothing more than what was required of you—no more “Mr. Nice Guy!”
- ☐ Sarcastic remarks to the “lazy” co-worker

It’s not difficult to understand how any of these reactions can happen when you face this type of co-worker relationship day in and day out. It’s very easy to become bitter and resentful. Resentfulness can start to show in sarcastic words, disgusted remarks, exasperated facial expressions, and body language. The wall between you and that co-worker builds quickly under these circumstances.

You’ve probably noticed that the Bible doesn’t have a chapter on

“dealing with difficult people,” but the principles we’ve already studied can be directly applied to the lazy person.

Please realize that God’s principles in these relationships may be far more than you would ever do on your own, and even more than your employer requires of you. God’s principles are higher, and we are held to a more righteous standard. The good news is that he empowers us to do what he requires us to do, because of the Holy Spirit within us.

Check the situations below which would indicate it is time to apply the “speak-the-truth-in-love” principle with a lazy person:

- ☐ You are sick and tired of doing this lazy person's work and you realize you are going to explode if you don't say something soon.
- ☐ A lazy co-worker is taking advantage of you and even taking credit for the work that you're doing, and that isn't fair to you.
- ☐ Management has a totally wrong impression of this lazy co-worker, and it's time they knew the real story.
- ☐ You realize that until this co-worker truly changes, he or she will continue to inflict harm on you and others, and that co-worker will never become the good employee/worker that he or she could be.
- ☐ You realize that you are now enabling this person to continue to do wrong and keeping him or her from learning to do what is right.
- ☐ God has given you a “green light” in your spirit. After much prayer, you know it is time to take some action.

Before you can speak the truth in love, your motive has to be right. Some of these motives would not be right for us as believers in Christ. Therefore, until our motives are changed, we should hold our tongue.

Alternative Approaches for the Lazy Co-worker

Here are some possible approaches you could take in dealing with a lazy co-worker. Note the potential pros and cons of each approach.

1. Allow the problem to surface by simply doing your own work well but not doing the other person's work. Eventually the poor work habits will come to the attention of those in power and hopefully will be confronted from an upper level position.

Pros	Cons

2. If letting the work go undone would be harmful to some innocent people like customers, have a direct discussion or confrontation with the co-worker to try to remedy the matter. If a confrontation doesn't work, eventually bring the matter to the attention of upper management.

Pros	Cons

3. Hang in there a while longer and go a few more extra miles, without griping, complaining, or gossiping.

Pros	Cons

4. Keep a record of the times when you have done the co-worker's work, so that you have some proof of the problem when you decide the time is right to confront the situation.

Pros	Cons

5. Approach the co-worker privately and try to solve the problem between the two of you. If that fails, go to one of the four approaches above.

Pros	Cons

Dealing with a Condescending, Arrogant Co-worker

Let's make sure we are certain of our definitions, as we discuss this type of co-worker.

What does *condescending* mean?

What does *arrogant* mean?

If you have ever worked with a condescending and/or arrogant co-worker, which of these terms would apply to that person or persons?

- ☐ Talks down to people
- ☐ Unteachable
- ☐ Knows it all
- ☐ “Been there and done that” attitude
- ☐ Name dropper
- ☐ Treats others as though they are dumb or stupid
- ☐ Frequent body language and facial expressions that indicate aloofness, disgust, disapproval, etc.

When someone has a continual attitude of arrogance and condescension, it is a telltale sign that underneath that intimidating outward appearance lies a great deal of insecurity and pain, and it reveals a lack of confidence, a need for recognition, and a fear of rejection.

There are times when the “extra-mile” principle is the one God would have us practice, just bearing with that arrogant person, not being intimidated by their behavior, but trying to ignore it as much as possible. Then we may need to speak the truth in love to that condescending person, when God gives us the green light to do so. Certainly God could use this person in our lives to teach us to humble ourselves as well.

Dealing with a Domineering Co-worker / Person

Have you ever worked with or known people who had delusions of greatness? They just seemed to assume that they had a right to manage other people, even though they had not earned the position of manager.

The “humble yourself” principle seems to come into play when a domineering person is around. Why is it particularly humbling to work or live with someone who is domineering and “bossy”?

Which of these responses to a domineering person would be a way for you to humble yourself?

- ☐ Refrain from any verbal response
- ☐ Be willing to do what they ask/demand, even though you are not required to do so
- ☐ Respond in a quiet, controlled manner
- ☐ Explain that you are not required to follow his/her instructions, but you are going to do so anyway
- ☐ Remind her/him of the chain of command in the organization and who you report to
- ☐ Smile when he/she barks orders at you, and then ignore
- ☐ Refuse to join in any “character assassination” of this person

There may be times when you will use the “speak-the-truth-in-love” principle with this type of co-worker as well as the “love your enemy” principle. But before you take any other action, ask God if there is some way you can learn to humble yourself through your relationship with this domineering co-worker.

Dealing with a Vindictive, Hostile Co-worker / Person

We sometimes work with vindictive, malicious, even vicious types who are openly trying to cause us problems and do us harm.

Jesus came to bring true light to the world, and when we become believers, he says that we are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). We become the bearers of his light into a very dark world. That is a great privilege, but it comes with its “downside.”

Read John 3:19-20:

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but _____ loved _____ instead of _____ because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil _____ the _____, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be _____.

Read John 15:18-19:

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the _____
_____.

Jesus gives us a clear warning of relationship problems we will incur because we are believers in him and carry his light into our dark worlds. Why should it be different for us than it was for him?

Therefore, we should not be shocked to discover that on occasion our Christian “light” will generate a hostile response from a co-worker. Remember what Jesus told us in the above passage from John 3—the reason for this unpleasant reaction is the fear of exposure. That person is aware of your glaring light, exposing his or her evil ways, so that person strikes out against you to try to “kill the light.”

What are some things this type of person might do in response to your “light”?

Have you really stopped to think about the impact of 1 Peter 2:19-21?

For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of _____ because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer _____ and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were _____, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should _____ in _____.

A few years ago I was memorizing this passage and the reality of this scripture began to dawn on me. Called to suffer unjustly? You've got to be kidding! I remember thinking, Lord, I just don't think I'll ever be really willing to do that. The only way we can learn to accept unjust suffering and treatment is to constantly remind ourselves that by doing so we have an opportunity to share in Jesus' suffering, which gives us the great privilege of learning to follow in his steps.

Think about it—when you are going through tough waters, you feel very close to someone who's been there before you, because that person really knows what you're feeling. When we have an opportunity to taste the kind of suffering Jesus drank fully for us, then we know him better. And that in turn brings his resurrection power into our lives.

Dealing with the Negative Person

Our worlds are full of negative thinking and talking people. It seems that they have nothing good or encouraging to say about anything or anyone. If you've ever had to work closely or have frequent contact with a very negative individual (and who hasn't!), you know just how tough it is to be around that person and not feel and express irritation.

What are some biblical responses to a very negative person?

When you are dealing with a very negative person, you will not find the “put on compassion” principle easy to do, because that person's behavior will not generate a naturally compassionate response on your part. In fact, it will likely generate hostility or disgust or anger. So, if you want to respond to a negative person in a biblical way, you will have to pray for the desire and the power to put on compassion toward that person.

Some kind words spoken to that negative person might be the key to getting him or her to get past that negativity and become more positive. However, consider another verse about words as given to us by the same wise Solomon in Proverbs 23:9:

Do not speak to _____ for they will

_____ your _____.

There are people who are committed to being negative, and nothing is going to move them from that position. To try to change them is futile and indeed that person will treat you with scorn. So, there are times that you cannot have a positive effect on a negative person, regardless of how kind your words may be or how good your motives are.

Conclusion

As we examine our relationships with these difficult types of people, we must constantly be aware of the fact that the problem may not always be the other person's. Unfortunately Christians are not always the ones in the white hats who never cause these interpersonal conflicts. There are times that we Christians fall into some of these categories in our behavior toward others: lazy, arrogant, domineering, vindictive, negative. And sometimes we excuse ourselves by calling it persecution!

It would do us all good to take a close look at each of these and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to us if we're guilty of any of these difficult characteristics in our relationships with our co-workers.

Notice 1 Peter 2:12:

Live such _____ among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

I think we frequently let ourselves off the hook by blaming our circumstances, our background, our tendency to be human! But the whole message of the Christian life is that we have been given power to be what we never could be otherwise. There should be a difference in how we live our lives, and we can never excuse ourselves for allowing any of these wrong attitudes to remain in our behavior toward our co-workers.

Suggested Assignment

Choose one person you know who fits one of these descriptions:

- ❖ Lazy
- ❖ Condescending, arrogant
- ❖ Domineering
- ❖ Vindictive, hostile

❖ Negative

The name of the person is _____ and he/she is a
_____ co-worker/friend.

My plan of action to deal with this person this week is:

Write out what you want to attempt to do. In applying God's principles and praying about this relationship and your plan of action each day, you will see some positive results.

Even if it means humbling yourself, swallowing your pride, going the extra mile, speaking the truth in love, or accepting unfair treatment, obeying God's principles will improve these relationships. I'm not promising you that the difficult person will change, but I will promise you that you will change and God will give you coping power you've never had before. Go for it!