

Seminar Notes on “Implications of God’s Love for our Human Relationships”
Given at GCI Conference, July 23, 2010

I. Introduction

Yesterday, I talked about the fact that love is not an ideal or a potential, but love *is the reality of the triune God*. This morning, I want to explore some of the implications of this reality for our human relationships. I know that I will not be able to say everything, or thoroughly explore this topic, but I hope that what I say is helpful and encouraging to you. Hopefully we can make a good start.

The very essence, or core of God is the holy, loving relationships within the Trinity. And we are created, or hard-wired, for relationships. So, relationships are connected to our deepest longings, hopes, joys, and our deepest fears, disappointments, and anguish.

As I said yesterday, we *often tend to work from our unexamined assumptions of what love and being loving means*. My daughter, Linda, put it well in a conversation on this topic: for the popular culture, love is something we **feel**, and for the church, love is something we **do**.

We are commanded to love each other: to love our neighbor as ourselves. But what does that look like? Does it mean to never say no? To always be available?

To help us in the church, we have produced many books of “how-tos”. While these can be helpful, there is a problem when they don’t help us look at the deeper reality of God’s real presence and work in our relationships. We end up being tempted to trust in the “how-tos” as the reality.

There are two main problems I can think of when we rely on these “how-tos”:

First—they can lead us to believe that God’s goal for us is primarily **external** to ourselves. We end up equating maturity, or the successful Christian life, with happy or smooth relationships.

Second—we can be tempted to believe that relationships are fairly simple to figure out and that we can solve almost any problem with the right technique. Of course, we feel like we have failed when the technique does not produce the hoped-for

result. Also, because we think that relationships are simple, we can be naïve about all the ways that we can sin, or be sinned against in our relationships.

II. The Nature of Fallen Relationships

Before we consider the triune God's redeeming work in our relationships, I want to have us look at a passage that I believe speaks of the dynamics of fallen relationships. That passage is Mark 10:35-45.

Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem with His disciples for the last time. He has just told them for the third time, of His deliverance by the Jews to the Gentiles, and of His death and His rising again.

James and John choose this moment to approach Him and say "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

Jesus responds, "What do you want me to do for you?"

James and John reply, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." No small request!

After Jesus discusses with them sharing in His cup and His baptism, He tells them that those places of honor are not His to grant.

The other ten hear of this interaction and they become indignant with James and John. Perhaps they are upset that they didn't think of this first!

At this point, Jesus sees a need to do some teaching, so He calls them all together and He says, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus characterizes relationships in the world as lording it over others. The word that is translated "lording it over" means not exercising rightful lordship, but to control or subjugate.

We usually think of lording it over as something that is done by people who are misusing their positions of authority: teacher over student, employer over employee, ruler over subject, or parent over child.

But what prompted Jesus to gather the disciples together and teach them? It was that James and John had tried to lord it over Jesus. They hoped to get Him to agree to their request before He knew what it was.

Lording it over—is any way we use to try to manipulate others to gain our own ends. When we lord it over, whether consciously or unconsciously, we are looking to hook some weakness in the other.

I would say that most lording it over is not done consciously. It is the “soup we swim in” in our fallen world. All of our relationships, disconnected from God, can be viewed in this way.

We lord it over others and they lord it over us because we have goals or expectations that we want to see happen. Again, I don’t think that we are usually consciously aware of our expectations. We may become aware of them when they aren’t met and we experience disappointment or resentment (or others are disappointed with or resentful of us).

Some possible expectations that either *others* or *we* can have in our relationships could include:

- Getting others to do what I want

- Wanting to appear to be a certain kind of person—for instance, to appear to be generous, thoughtful, or sensitive. Notice this person is not so much hoping to **be** these things, just **to appear to be**.

- Wanting to be left alone, not to get involved with others

- Trying to keep from getting hurt by others

- Wanting to gain sympathy or attention from others—have them focus on you. Again, as with all of these, this can be what someone else is aiming to do to you.

- Getting someone back for hurting us

- Just enjoying having power to wield over another

- Wanting to be liked by everyone, always trying to be popular
- Keeping everyone happy
- Trying to avoid blame or make sure that no one is ever disappointed or mad at us
- Getting my agenda accomplished.

The list above is not complete, but just an attempt to get us thinking about what expectations we have of others, or others have of us. Here are some ways we can try to lord it over others, or ways others lord it over us to meet our expectations:

- Force
- Indirect comments (not being straight about what you want or what you think, so keeping the other person always unsure)
 - Guilt trips, in other words trying to make the other person feel guilty—for whatever—that they didn't remember, didn't notice, don't care, etc.
 - Sulking when don't get one's way, trying to get the other to relent
 - Teasing (I would distinguish kidding and teasing with my children by saying that when you are kidding, you know that the other person will enjoy what you say as much as you do. But if there is any chance the other person won't be amused, then it is teasing). I find that teasing can have a double-edge to it. Someone can tease you, and then make you feel bad about being hurt by saying, "Oh come on, I was just kidding!"
 - Exposing someone to the teasing of others
 - Belittling
 - Sarcasm. This is one I did so much when I was younger, that it took my children's negative reactions for me to realize and try to stop it.
 - Withholding affection
 - Threats
 - Flirting, or flattery
 - Gossiping
 - Pity—I think this is especially prevalent and dangerous because it can be subtle. For Christians, we want to be loving and it can be hard to recognize when someone is using pity, playing the victim, in order to manipulate others.

It seems to me that we lord it over others, or they us, *when we are trying to grab for, and hold onto, our identity and our life from somewhere else besides God*. It is as if we think there is only so much love, prestige, power, status, etc. out there and it is up to us to secure our share. Whenever we are acting out of distrust in God, we are trying to exercise some control in ways that lead to lording it over. We fear or believe that **we** are **ultimately** in charge of taking care of ourselves and/or others.

III. But Jesus goes on in Mark 10 and says, “it will not be so among you”

Notice He doesn’t say “I don’t want this to go on among you” but “*it will not be so among you*”. It won’t be so because it is not so in the loving triune relationship that Jesus has come to give us a share in. The Father never lords it over the Son or the Spirit, the Son never lords it over the Father or the Spirit, and the Spirit never lords it over the Father or the Son. And Jesus, who lives in the fullness of relationship with the Father and the Son, never lords it over us—even to accomplish our good.

The reality that Jesus brings us into *includes our relationships*. We are not redeemed as independent individuals in Christ, but then have to work out our relationships on our own or with some help from the Holy Spirit.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul speaks of Christ’s work of redemption in connection with the relationships between Jews and Gentiles. What he tells his readers is that what Jesus creates is not potential, but actual:

“For he **is** our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, *that he might create in himself one new man in place of two*, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby *bringing the hostility to an end.*” (2:14-16)

God’s intention for our relationships—is to enter into the reality He gives us. Jesus has truly united us to Himself, at the level of our being, and, **in Himself**, has united us to one another. He really **is** our peace. Our relationships find their true meaning and fulfillment **only** in Christ.

Our relationships, like us, will only be fully perfected and glorified in the new heaven and earth, and will be SO MUCH BETTER than what we settle for here. As C.S. Lewis says, “Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. . . . **We are far too easily pleased.**” (*Transposition and Other Addresses*, ch. 2)

It is this solid hope that sheds light on the present for us, and puts it into context. We are to live today, rooted in that hope that God will faithfully bring about. For now, our lives, and our relationships, are “hid in Christ” (Col. 3:3).

III. Jesus mediates our relationships.

We live out our relationships **in** Christ. We participate in what **He** is doing. He mediates all of our relationships.

How do we participate in Christ’s mediation?

A. First—by abiding in His real, active, loving presence

John 15—This is part of the long section of teaching that Jesus gives His disciples before He goes to the cross.

Jesus says that He is the vine and we are the branches, and that we are to abide in Him. To abide means to remain or to continue. God has made room in Himself for us and room in us for Himself. Notice, the only command in this section *is to abide*. Jesus doesn’t tell them to make themselves branches, and He doesn’t tell them to bear fruit.

I think that this command is easily neglected. We think it means just doing nothing. Or, since we aren’t sure what it means to abide, we just focus on obeying other commands instead. I believe that Jesus speaks at length here, because He knows how strong the temptation is *not to abide*, not to live by trust. It is similar to the author’s admonition in the book of Hebrews that the readers should *strive to enter His rest* (4:11).

The most repeated command in Scripture is not to be anxious or afraid. Jesus gives His peace to actually live in.

So, let's consider more deeply what this abiding looks like:

First of all, *abiding means having our identity, our life, and our relationships only in Jesus*—which is where they belong. He truly is our **only** source of identity and life. We are to continually attach all of our strings to Him. In other words, we are not to look to others, or our circumstances, our past, our education, or anything else—to find our identity and our life. Only God, the loving, gracious triune God, can tell us who we are, can give us real life. The German theologian, Karl Barth, said that Scripture forbids us to take sin more seriously, or even **as** seriously, as grace.

This means that we are to let go of all of our expectations. We tend to have expectations because we are still looking for our identity, our security, from other sources. We can let them go (over and over) because God **will** be present, living, faithfully at work in all our lives. Jesus **can** be counted on to be faithful. We can hold every one and everything lightly, hand it all over to Jesus. Jesus cares about us and all those we love, know, and/or are in some relationship with and He is faithfully at work.

God will never allow what He can't and won't redeem. He can always “play the ball where it lies”, can always work from where we actually are and take us to the next step. He is **confident** in His own ability to fulfill His good purposes.

The command to abide is **present** tense—which means that we are to continually choose to abide. We are to continually look away from ourselves and from our relationships to know the truth in Jesus. We are to continually receive God's word of delight to us.

Abiding is not just the **means** God wants us to use, but it is the **end**. His sanctification of us is to make us more and more able to abide in Him, freed to fully enjoy and participate in the loving relationship and life of the Trinity. My daughter Krista said recently that there is no limit to God's love, but He has to make room in us to fill us.

When we abide in the peace and presence of Jesus, then we have something to offer others.

God's goal is not that we have perfect relationships here and now, and is not that we are to be perfect now, or have all the answers. I can remember, when I first got married, thinking that God could get so much more done through me to others if He would just go ahead and perfect me—He didn't seem to think too much of the idea!

God's goal is for us *to participate in our own becoming and in the becoming of others*. We participate by living out of trust in His faithful and good character and work.

Abiding in Christ is deliberate—not passive and not automatic. Abiding includes:

-Thanking God. Thanksgiving is our “reality check”—it helps us remember and receive again God's actual and active presence.

-Living in the present moment. The only place we can meet God is *in this present moment*. We waste a lot of time living in the past or the future. Each day really is a gift—it is not automatic, but is a gift to be taken up and received. When we live by principles or commands only, we are living in the real **absence** of God, not the real **presence**.

-Recognizing that we are **always** “bugs in a rug”. We are never able to see the whole picture—even in ourselves. It really is, therefore, never up to us.

-Trusting our sanctification and our relationships to Him, over and over again. We trust **Him** to take us to the next step in this becoming process. Abiding includes listening in prayer and letting Him bring up various things that need His healing. God is always at work **internally** transforming us, because His purpose is for us to know full life **in** Him.

For example, let's consider how trusting in Christ's actual mediating work helps us forgive others. Forgiveness is not something we do on our own. We hand over the sin committed against us and the person who sinned and we trust that God will deal with it. Forgiveness doesn't mean trying to say that what was done was okay. And it doesn't mean that you should feel bad that you were hurt by what was done or said because “they didn't really mean it” or “they did their best”. The sin is still the sin that it

is and it still has an impact. When we hand it over to Jesus, we trust that He takes it seriously, more seriously than we do. He is not pressuring us to just “get over it”.

God never forgives sin—He destroys it. He is against sin, wrathful because it destroys His good creation. And this includes all sin—God will deal with all of it and none will be left. God does forgive the sinner; He extends grace to us so that sin *does not become the last word*. We wait on Him to bring to the surface things we need to hand over of our own sin and sins that have been committed against us. And we can trust that as we hand over it to Him in faith, He will enable us more and more to forgive completely and to be more and more healed in Him.

B. Deal with all relationships indirectly

Abiding means that Jesus *is our most present reality*, and we deal with everything else indirectly. We deal with being sinned against and sinning in and through God, always within His gracious, faithful presence.

The second main point that I want to make, then, is that letting Christ mediate means that *we deal with all of our relationships indirectly*. We are not our own, and our relationships are not our own (1 Corinthians 6:20)

Jesus *always stands between us and others*. He is actually, actively present. Picture making room between yourself and the other person, every time—even in, or maybe especially in your closest relationships. As we actively look to see what Jesus is doing in our relationships, we learn to receive from others only what Jesus is giving us and give to others only what He gives us to give.

Receiving:

We are to receive only what Jesus gives to us in our relationships. Let Jesus receive first all that the other is trying to hand on to you and let Him decide what to have you receive, and He keeps the rest. Don't let other voices tell you who you are, or what your worth is. Filter all that you hear through the truth of God. Because the truth is, of course, that no one can tell us who we are, we cannot even tell ourselves. Because we are not ourselves apart from Christ!

If it helps, picture Jesus as a shield around you, and listen for the “plink” when someone shoots arrows at you. Let Jesus deal with the “toxic” comments and actions that come your way. They are not the truth and you do not need to handle them directly.

Develop the practice of keying off the presence of Jesus in your interactions with others. To abide in Him and His mediation is to live in His peace, not in the peace (or lack of peace) of our circumstances. This, as I have said, is a deliberate and continual act. Notice what patterns, interactions lead to a lack of peace and change them.

This is not only the most loving way to be for you, but also for them. By seeking to stay peaceful in Christ, we are treating others as if they **too** can be full in Christ, and know and live in His peace. We don't have anything to offer but the good and wonderful reality of the triune God. In the end, we are not loving at the deepest level when we act out of guilt, fear, anxiety, resentment, or anger.

Reality is there for us, and for others. We either receive it or refuse it and we receive it again and again, not just once. As we learn to abide more and more in Jesus and in His peace, He enables us to be more free to receive from others what *they actually can give at this time*, which may be very little, rather than always expecting them to give something else.

Giving

We are to give only what Jesus gives us to give. This involves active listening to, and waiting on Jesus while you are paying attention to the interactions or circumstances at hand. We trust that He is already at work in this present interaction and we can wait on Him to give us the words He wants us to speak.

This can free us to be happy to give only a “cup of cold water” if that is what He gives us to give. For instance, with my children I am often tempted to believe that I know best. Because I can see, or I believe I can, just what they need to hear to steer them in the right direction, I want to think that this “wisdom” is what I am supposed to give. Many times, in the middle of the night, I will have long conversations with one of my children in my head, but when I seek to abide in the actual moment of interaction the next

morning, I often find that these words are not what He wants me to hand on. Sometimes the only thing He wants me to give at that moment is breakfast!

We can't really decide for the future what is best; we abide in the actual moment at hand. We look for God's actual work and are led by peace and permission in Him. There are times, certainly when we are anxious. But the question isn't whether we are anxious, but *whether God is anxious*. If He isn't anxious, then we can trust He is not calling us to speak or act out of our anxiety.

C. Letting Jesus justify us

When we participate in Christ's mediating work in our lives and relationships, we let God justify us. We acknowledge that He really is the One who tells us who we are, and that it is His grace that we look at, not our efforts. We acknowledge that we don't really do our best.

In the last couple of years, we discovered that one of our children, when very young, was deeply sinned against by an older child in another Christian family, a family that we were good friends with. It was truly heart wrenching. As I wrestled with the overpowering guilt at not being able to prevent this, many good, well-meaning friends would remind me that it was not my fault and that I was a good mother—that I had done my best.

But as I agonized, I realized that I had done things that had been harmful to my children. I was not the perfect mother. I have been sarcastic, inattentive, and anxious. I realized that I wanted to have God acknowledge that I had at least done my best, but I realized that I hadn't. I didn't do my best because God has me living here while I am not yet fully sanctified in Him. He is growing me up in the midst of my being a wife and a friend, and in the midst of raising my children.

And He is okay with that. While I want to think the main work God is doing is in my circumstances, I realize again and again that from His perspective, the main thing He is doing is internally transforming me. He knows what He is doing; He did not make a mistake in making me the mother of these children. He will not allow anything that He cannot and will not redeem, and because He lives, *Love is always the last word*.

I can remember when my first daughter was born—holding her and being terrified. I knew I was a mess. How could God entrust me with this beautiful, helpless child?

Well, I don't always know what He is doing in my husband and children, but I have seen many times His glorious work in freeing me more and more to live in Him and to look only to Him for my identity and life. He has amazed me at times in enabling me to be peaceful and to move towards others in grace, when there is no reason for this from the actual circumstances.

We are to abide **in Christ—not** in our circumstances, our relationships, our talents, our intelligence, not in anything of our own. We trust Him to be Who is revealing Himself to us to be. He will be faithful to work—this we can count on.