

The Jesus Box

Our Relationships

1. Four key relationships.

- **God**
 - *Jeremiah 3:19; Luke 6:32-36*
- **Family**
 - *1 Timothy 5:8; Ephesians 5:25-33, 6:1-4; Titus 2:4; Psalm 68:6*
- **Church**
 - *Hebrews 10:25*
- **The World**
 - *Matthew 28:18-20*

2. Keys to healthy relationships.

- **Be patient**
 - *1 Corinthians 13:4-5; Ephesians 4:2*
- **Don't be ruled by anger**
 - *Ephesians 4:26-27; Hebrews 12:14-15*
- **Watch your words**
 - *Proverbs 18:21; Ephesians 4:29*
- **Choose to forgive**
 - *Ephesians 4:31-32; Colossians 3:13*

3. Keys to deal with offenses.

- **Talk to God**
 - *1 Peter 5:7*
- **Talk to the person**
 - *Matthew 18:15*
- **Do NOT talk to others**
 - *Proverbs 16:28, 20:19, 26:20*

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The Jesus Box: Relationships

True followers of Christ don't compartmentalize their lives; you don't have a church box and a family box and a job box and a school box and a dating box and a Friday night box...you only have ONE box and that is the Jesus Box. You don't step out of that box when you leave here and then step into a different box tomorrow:

EVERYTHING IN THE CHRISTIAN'S LIFE goes in the Jesus Box. Jesus is your primary and only life, and you live the Jesus-life at work or at school or on a date or on your computer or phone or social media... there are no separate boxes; there is only the Jesus Box.

So in this series, for the next several weeks we are going to look at some of the main areas of our lives that we tend to compartmentalize and deal with on our own, and today we are looking at relationships.

Being a pastor for over 40 years, I've learned that ministry is all about relationships. In the course of those years, I've encountered relationships through pastoral care, through counseling, through leading others and friendship. I've seen relationships that are difficult and some that are easy. I've learned a lot about relationships in the process – not to mention the times I've succeeded and where I've blown it in my own personal life of relationships.

Here's what I've learned: when we try to manage our relationships on our own – without first submitting them to Christ – when we haven't put them in the Jesus Box – there are some inevitable challenges that we may face. Here's some of what I've seen in my own life and from others:

One of the problems we can face is that our own well-being becomes dependent on our relationships with other people.

Now hear me out – healthy relationships are a huge benefit to our own well-being! That's what this sermon is all about. But if our well-being is dependent on them, it is very unhealthy.

I had a friend in college who seemed like he was always only in a good mood or a bad one. Nothing in between. Over time I realized why: if he had a girlfriend, and if things were going well with her, he was in a great mood. If he didn't have a girlfriend, or if things weren't going great with her, he would be like Eeyore. His well-being was completely dependent on another person.

For our relationships to be healthy, we need to get to the place where our well-being is something we can *offer* others – instead of *take from* others. Relationships *can* greatly contribute to our well-being; but ultimately our well-being is grounded in our own relationship with God and is not dependent on any person. Here's the

thing: if you are dependent on those around you for your well-being, you will end up being easily hurt or too thin-skinned. Because every time there is a perceived slight or hurt you become angry or sad.

The problem with that is that then you never fully enter into a meaningful relationship because you've been hurt in the past, or because you are easily hurt, you hold back in every relationship, and you don't ever trust other people. By doing that, you make your new friends pay the price for your old hurts. And when you don't trust people, every time they fail you in some way, big or small (and people will *always* fail you), whenever that happens it reinforces your lack of trust.

To keep from being hurt, you begin to think you have to keep that person happy or liking you, so you end up walking on eggshells in your important relationships. Rather than contributing to them, you become a pleaser trying to maintain them. But we all *need* people who will be honest with us and even be willing to say things we don't want to hear. But that will never happen if you are walking on eggshells because you are too busy trying to maintain your fragile well-being.

We can even become controlling; we think that if we are going to avoid being hurt, we have to control what the other person does or doesn't do. We are afraid to lose control because that would result in our pain or hurt or rejection.

I'm not saying that if we *don't* approach our relationships from the Jesus Box then automatically, we become controlling people! But if any of these feel familiar: being thin-skinned and easily hurt, depending on others for our own well-being, becoming mistrusting, walking on eggshells or becoming controlling; if any of those feel familiar, you'll want to pay attention.

Now, there's no way I can fully describe unhealthy relationships in a few short minutes; there is an entire industry of therapy and counselors that have practices, and millions of books have been written to do that. My point is only to help us see that if our approach to *any* relationship is not from the Jesus Box, those unhealthy relationships are going to impact us.

So let me focus on the...

1. Four key relationships

...in our lives and what it means for them to be in the Jesus Box. Every person who is a Christian will have and need these four key relationships. If you are not a Christian, you are missing one these, and the other three won't be as rich, meaningful, and transformative as they could be. Living life in the Jesus Box is a God-quality life that gives us the capacity for our relationships to be valuable and life giving.

The first key relationship is with...

- God.

You and I were created to be in relationship with God. He longs to be in relationship with you; that is why he sent his Son to suffer and die on the cross and then raised him from the dead – so that our sin could be forgiven and its power broken, and we could be in relationship with him.

The longings of God's heart are revealed when he was speaking to his people Israel through the prophet Jeremiah. The people of Israel had once again walked away from God, but he kept reaching out to them, and what he told *them* is the same thing he says to *you and me*. Listen to the way God describes his desired relationship with us:

"I thought to myself, 'I would love to treat you as my own children!' I wanted nothing more than to give you this beautiful land—the finest possession in the world. I looked forward to your calling me 'Father,' and I wanted you never to turn from me. (Jeremiah 3:19, nlt)

God longs for this relationship with you – you are *his* priority relationship, and he can be yours.

If you *do* have this relationship with God and it is healthy and growing, then it becomes the foundation and the touchstone for the health of the other three priority relationships we have.

This relationship with God can be yours through asking God to forgive you, then accepting what Jesus Christ has done for you through his suffering and death on the cross and resurrection. It is *from* this relationship with God you will have the confidence you need, the patience you need, the love you need – on and on, which will equip you to be your best in every other relationship. That's because when you really know and live in the fact that God loves you with everything he has and is, you realize you don't deserve His love and can't earn it, and that keeps us humble.

Knowing we are loved by God and being humble allows us to enter every other relationship from a place of confidence. What does that mean? Well then: will someone hurt you? Probably, but you know that God loves you. Will someone betray you? Probably – they did it to Jesus, too – but God loves you. Will you mess up? Very, very likely you will, but God loves you and will forgive you and give you the strength to do things right. Living from this place of love and humility is *exactly* why Jesus said we can and must love not only those who *like* us, but we must love those who *don't like* us:

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great... Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. " (Luke 6:32-36, niv)

If you are thin-skinned with your *friends*, how will you love your *enemies*? A relationship with God through Christ makes all the difference.

The next of the four key relationships is...

- Family.

The obvious ones we are talking about are immediate family – your husband or wife, your children, or your parents. These relationships are to be a priority. If you read the Old Testament, you will see that the whole nation of Israel is built family by family. If you read the New Testament, you'll see that we are encouraged to care for our own immediate family in passages like:

1 Timothy 5:8, Ephesians 5:25-33 and 6:1-4 and Titus 2:4 (write those down!).

Family relationships are an important priority for Jesus Box people.

Now let me just say, I realize this talk of family might be difficult for some of us if we don't have any immediate family – maybe you are single, or you don't have children, or perhaps your spouse or parents have passed away, or you have no siblings. But don't be discouraged – the Bible says to you:

“God sets the lonely in families.” (Psalm 68:6, niv)

God will give you family, even if you are alone, and that is the next set of priority relationships that you are to have...

- church family.

Having a relationship with people in church is a priority relationship that all Jesus Box people need to have.

When the Bible talks about church, it's used two different ways: one is used to mean *the Universal Church* – capital “C”, which refers to every believer in Jesus who has ever lived in history and around the world. The other way that the word “church” is used when it identifies *the local church* – a group of believers that meet together in a specific geographical location. The number of times the Universal Church is referenced in the New Testament is: *twice*. Every other time, which is well over a hundred times – it us used to refer to the local church.

The place where we learn to lean into and live out our faith and love is in the *local* church. We can't do this Christianity thing alone and we were not meant to; we were created for community. That means that local church relationships are an important priority.

And that's why the Bible says:

“Some people have gotten out of the habit of meeting for worship, but we must not do that. We should keep on encouraging each other, especially since you know that the day of the Lord's coming is getting closer.”
(Hebrews 10:25, cev)

The Bible tells believers to prioritize the relationships of the local church gathering together regularly. That's why we strongly encourage all of us to participate regularly in worship services, but beyond that, to consider being in a Life Group on a

regular basis. We can come to church on Sunday mornings and worship together and never grow closer to the people around us, but in a Life Group, that's where we learn to love each other. More than that, we learn to LIKE each other! We help each other grow. We pray for each other. We share our needs and concerns. We hold each other accountable. If the bulk of your spiritual growth is dependent on Sunday mornings, you will miss out on the blessing of these closer relationships. You need these key relationships with other believers when you are living in the Jesus Box.

Finally there is a fourth key relationship that we must have, and that is with...

- the world.

When I say "the world" I am referring to those people who are outside the church who do not have a relationship with God through faith in Jesus. If you are a Christian living in the Jesus Box, then you must have relationships with people who are not.

There is a tendency for people, once they've become a Christian, to gradually develop more and more *Christian* friends and less and less *non-Christian* friends. It's only natural – we tend to gather more relationships with those whom we have things in common, and having Christ in common is a BIG one. But Jesus tells us:

"I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20, nlt)

How can we obey this command if we isolate ourselves from the world around us? Our number one task on this earth as believers in Jesus is to build relationships with people who don't have a relationship with God, and in the process, we might introduce them to Jesus. These are people who are living below the spiritual poverty level and don't realize how abundant their life can be. Having relationships with folks outside the church, seeking to be a positive influence and blessing in their lives, is a daily thing for people who live in the Jesus Box. We need these relationships, and they may eventually lead to something spiritually transforming for others.

God, family, church, the world. There are challenges in each of these four areas of relationship, aren't there? Especially when it comes to the three that deal with people. God is always the same – we can count on his unchanging love and unchanging character. But how do we deal with people in our family and church and world in order to make sure those relationships are healthy? What does it look like for us to put these relationships in the Jesus Box? Let's look at some...

2. Keys to healthy relationships.

Managing relationships is not an easy thing; if you have two people together in a room, then you have at least three different opinions on any given topic!

Learning how to navigate these relationships requires some important skills that God has provided in his Word and which you can accomplish from inside the Jesus Box. Let me give you some incredibly practical and very powerful keys to healthy relationships. (Remember that it starts with a growing relationship with God, knowing you are loved by him).

When it comes to any relationship with people, remember that you must...

- be patient.

As a Christian, you have a life that allows you to love others first and foremost, no matter what they may or may not do. So, the Bible says:

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.” (1 Corinthians 13:4-5, niv)

Be patient with those whom you are in relationship with; relax! Nothing they do is going to be the end of the world. Don’t get all worked up. Just understand that there’s a good chance they are going to do something to disappoint or even hurt you. Sometimes it’s on purpose, but most of the time they didn’t mean to. Still:

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” (Ephesians 4:2, niv)

(Remember what we said about being humble?) *That* means (important!): *always assume the other person has good intentions*. Even if they disappoint you, always assume they have good intentions – at least until they prove otherwise. Assume the best! When we are approaching relationships from an unhealthy place, we tend to assume the worst. Always bracing for the worst. Approaching relationships from the Jesus Box means we will assume the best about others.

But, when the time comes that they do offend you or hurt you...

- don't be ruled by anger.

Anger is an emotional response, and we are mistaken to think that it is something that we can’t control – especially as people who live in the Jesus Box. Even if the person you are in relationship is not able to control *their* anger, *you* can! It’s not that you won’t get angry – you will. But *it’s what you do with your anger*, and how you express it, that makes the difference. That’s why the Bible says:

“In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.” (Ephesians 4:26-27, niv)

Anger is a dangerous emotion that can damage and destroy relationships. When you are hurt or offended by someone and you hang on to your anger, it can turn to

bitterness inside you and even lead to depression. Bitterness is to the soul what cancer is to the body; unchecked, it will consume more and more of you. And psychologists agree that depression has been called “anger turned inward.” So again, the Bible, which is the Word of God for Jesus Box people, says this:

“Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.”
(Hebrews 12:14-15, niv)

How are you doing so far? Do you see how practical and yet powerful it is to approach relationships inside the Jesus Box? We want to be a church that is filled with healthy relationships, so I am really praying that we can ask God and cooperate with him to put these into practice in our lives.

If you do find yourself losing patience and feeling angry, be sure to...

- watch your words.

I like what comedian Steve Martin said about this: "Before you criticize a man, walk a mile in his shoes. That way, when you do criticize him, you'll be a mile away and have his shoes."

Maybe it would be better if we simply watched our words. Words have incredible power. Remember that in the very beginning of creation in the book of Genesis, when God created everything? In every instance – when he created light, land, animals, people, what did God do? He *spoke*: “God said...” Well, as people created in God’s image, *our* words have the power to build up or tear down, too. Proverbs says:

“The tongue can bring death or life; those who love to talk will reap the consequences.” (Proverbs 18:21, nlt)

The Bible has a lot to say about our words. Maybe even more important than the debate about gun control ought to be a discussion about word control! Maybe if people would only speak kindness to others, we wouldn’t have people who feel victimized and powerless and think their only option is violence.

We are further instructed and empowered by God’s Word in this way:

“Don’t use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.” (Ephesians 4:29, nlt)

Watch your words! Not only what your lips say but what your thumbs say as you are typing things on your phone onto social media. Maybe this is *especially* true for what you say there. Let your words be constructive and not destructive, and you will be on your way to healthy relationships.

The next is really, really important, and perhaps the hardest: if someone says or does destructive and hurtful or offensive things to you...

- choose to forgive.

The alternative to anger and the antidote to pain is forgiveness. That's why the Bible tells us to:

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you."
(Ephesians 4:31-32, nlt)

This is especially true for people who live in the Jesus Box. God's forgiveness of us is no small thing and was no simple task; it took Jesus' death and resurrection. It is at the center of how we are able to have a relationship with our loving God. It is also going to be at the center of our relationships with people:

"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." (Colossians 3:13, niv)

We have been forgiven, so we are people who love so much that we choose to forgive.

By the way: forgiveness and trust are not the same thing. *Forgiveness is free. Trust must be earned.* If someone has hurt you, you must forgive them, but that does not mean you have to blindly trust them. Forgiveness *does* mean, though, that you will begin to let them earn back your trust if they desire to do so. Got it?

Since we have been talking about how we can be hurt or offended, let me share quickly...

3. Keys to deal with offenses

We've already said that it's inevitable in any relationship that we are going to be hurt or offended; sometimes people do it on purpose, and most of the time it is accidental. Either way, it is bound to happen. In order to be able to be patient and not lash out in anger and to choose constructive words and to even forgive, let me give you some counsel on what you can do that will help you in these things.

Approaching relationships in the Jesus Box means that whenever we are hurt or offended, we can...

- Talk to God

...about it first in prayer. Pray that God would give you wisdom. Pour out your feelings to him. Express your anger. Ask him to heal your hurt and brokenness. Remember that you can:

"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7, niv)

Then, if you need to...

- Talk to the person

If it would be beneficial to work it out with the person for *their sake as much as yours*, then I would encourage you to do it – especially if you feel that they have sinned against you (just because they hurt you doesn't mean they sinned). If they have not sinned, then determine if talking to them will help or further hurt the relationship. Either way, if you do decide to talk to the person, know it will be hard, and you might risk rejection again, so be careful and be wise about it. Don't go into it with guns blazing or you'll get shot at too. Go into it humbly and gently, seeking the best for the other person. Jesus tells us how to do that:

"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over." (Matthew 18:15, niv)

If the person doesn't listen, Jesus gives more instructions about next steps that you can take if you still feel you need to – you can read it in the rest of Matthew 18.

Remember though that the purpose of talking to that person is reconciliation of the relationship. That's your motivation – not to tell them how much they hurt you or to get back at them or be passive aggressive toward them. If you don't have a genuine desire to reconcile, don't approach them about it. Instead, pray for the desire to reconcile, and *then* do it. It might be impossible to reconcile; some people simply don't want to. But *you* must always be ready when they do want to reconcile. And by all means, whatever you do...

- Do NOT talk to others about it.

If you are talking to someone about someone else, and the person you are talking to is not part of the problem and not part of the solution, you have no business talking to them about the other person. That is what the Bible calls gossip, and the Bible plainly calls gossip sin. Let me just give you a small fraction of what the Bible says about that:

"A troublemaker plants seeds of strife; gossip separates the best of friends." (Proverbs 16:28, niv)

"A gossip tells secrets, so don't hang around with someone who talks too much." (Proverbs 20:19)

"Fire goes out for lack of fuel, and quarrels disappear when gossip stops." (Proverbs 26:20)

God clearly commands us – do not gossip and do not hang around with a gossip. And remember: if someone will gossip TO you, they will also gossip ABOUT you. Make a commitment to never again say something negative about someone to others.

If you can do these things, you will find yourself growing healthy in those four key relationships – with God, with your family, with people in your church family and people who are outside of the church.

To handle relationships from the Jesus Box means we have to deal with relationships. But we can't force anyone to start acting in healthy ways in their relationships. All we can do is determine to live that way *ourselves* in *our* relationships with family, the church, and the world, by the power of God. That's the Jesus Box life of relationships. When we do that, we will find that the world around us is being transformed, one relationship at a time, one life at a time.

Prayer

Benediction:

Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. (2 Corinthians 13:11)