

Introduction

Definition of a challenging relationship:

A challenging relationship is one that is characterized by tension, misunderstanding, anger, or hurt. When you're in a challenging relationship attaining peace, unity, or understanding seems to take an extraordinary effort and is often short lived. People in a challenging relationship often feel trapped and helpless, and that there is no hope for change.

What are the challenging relationships in your life? Is it with your husband, your child, your mother or mother-in-law, your boss, your co-worker? We are all with people everyday, and there are bound to be challenges as we interact with others because we have differences of opinions, different priorities, different ways of doing things, different expectations, and we even differ in the pace of life that we prefer. The relationships I want to talk about tonight are those where we have consistent difficulty—the ones where bad patterns have developed over time.

Goals for the evening:

- To help you see the power you have to make a difference in your relationships.
- To help you see how the power of God can make a difference in your relationships
- To give you the tools to step back and look at the problem and be proactive in making changes.

I. Understanding Challenging Relationships

A. Causes

Where do these challenging relationships come from? We didn't sign up for these. More often these are relationships that develop. We don't really see them coming. It is helpful to know what brings these things on – what causes these things.

- High and unrealistic expectations on our part – Sometimes as time goes on we grow more and more disappointed with the people in our lives. They are not who we expected them to be, and sometimes we respond to that with frustration, nagging, anger and sadness on our own part. I'd like you to consider something that may be uncomfortable for you. That the problem is they are human and your expectations of them are something that no matter how hard they try they can't live up to. What's worse is when people live with someone who has unrealistic expectations they often give up trying, and actually get worse.

I don't know you, and no one paid me to say this, but I would encourage you to consider, if you are in a situation where a lot of people seem to be letting you down, you may be the one who needs to add grace to your relationships with people. By adding grace what I mean, is when they let you down, forgive them. When a child spills his milk, overlook it. Make sure people feel like they can win with you. If my husband takes out the trash and I say "It's about time." He may think "Why bother, I can't get anything right." It disheartens him from ever doing it again.

- Unhealthy patterns that have become ruts – One of the big problems in long-term relationships is that when we have a problem we don't really resolve it. The intense emotions pass and we tend to let sleeping dogs lie. We don't want to have the argument again. It won't go away by itself and it tends to get replayed over and over again. If you allow it to, it may become a defining characteristic of your relationship. If you find yourself having the same argument over and over again, a little insight and proactive behavior can change the pattern. Steve and I had a real hurtful situation that would come up in our relationship. It would come up and we would get hurt, we wouldn't talk about it, until finally we talked about it during an unemotional time and worked through it. People are afraid to bring things up that are filled with conflict, because they don't want to rock the boat or ruin a good day – but we need to break the pattern.
- Challenging life circumstances – the daily care of an ailing parent, a disabled child or spouse. Sometimes things are fine and then a mother has a stroke, a child has an accident, an aging parent gets Alzheimers and is unable to care for herself and life becomes stressful. Stressful times reveal any weaknesses in a relationship. The challenging relationship may not be with your ailing parent, it may be with your husband. But then again, it may be with the ailing parent.
- Severe character flaws – We all get angry. From time to time we get impulsive. Sometimes we spend more than we should. Sometimes we tell lies. But when a person is dominated by any of those sins and the behavior is out of control, it creates a challenging relationship.

One side note to parents with children – you date personality, but you marry character. Help your kids identify the character of the person they are dating – are they a person of integrity, self-control, kindness.

If you are in a relationship with a person who has a significant flaw in their character you have a challenging relationship. If you have a daughter who is a chronic liar, your relationship will naturally be devoid of trust.

If you can love the person with the wisdom that says I want to help you see how this is damaging your life "I want so much to trust you but I can't. Is there a way that we could work together to help you stop lying." "Your anger (your spending) is destroying our family. I need you to understand that your anger is pushing your children and me away from you. We are at a crossroads, and I want to help you do whatever we can to get a hold of your anger."

B. Types of Challenging Relationships

1. Hurtful relationships

a) Constant conflict

- Arguing
- Anger
- You tend to disagree on most things, or on the same things over and over (money, who is to do what, etc.). You say white, he says black.
- You know how to and enjoy pushing each other's buttons. It becomes a game.

b) Abusive behavior

- People abuse or take advantage of you physically, verbally, emotionally, economically
- They use guilt, fear, shame and intimidation to wear you down and gain power over you
- They may threaten or hurt you

2. Oppressive relationships

a) High Expectations

- Nothing you do is ever good enough
- Your life revolves around pleasing them. Progress is not rewarded, it's always held in light of perfection.
- They take your failure as a personal affront

b) Controlling behavior

- Demanding, overbearing
- Always right
- Micromanages your life – they try to minimize any independent thought or decisions
- Tight reins on your money, your whereabouts, your schedule

c) Manipulation

Manipulators are usually great communicators, very intelligent verbally, and they've learned to use their skills to get what they want.

- Do anything to get what they want
- Rarely say what they mean, deceptive communication – you will discover that they drop thoughts about something to soften you up. They will rarely come out and say what they'd like. They want you to think that you came up with the idea.
- Cry, whine, beg, etc. until you give in
- Shift the blame – if you bring up a complaint, somehow the conversation turns around so that it is your fault.

3. Exasperating relationships

- a) Self destructive behavior – people who struggle with drug, alcohol, eating disorders, or extreme impulsiveness
 - You want to help them – to fix them, to make it better
 - This is hard when it is your spouse, your parent, your child because it hurts to see them hurt themselves
 - You often have to live with the consequences of their behavior
 - They seem to live from crisis to crisis

- b) High Needs – People who are in high need situations of life – aging parents, someone suffering from deep depression, and accident or serious illness

- c) Irresponsible behavior – most times people aren't irresponsible in every area of life, but the husband may not help you take responsibility with the kids and you feel all alone in the battle.

II. Dealing with Challenging Relationships

You can determine how you are going to respond to others. We can be the change agents, the influencers, in our families and other relationships and begin to pass on a legacy of kindness and love and change the patterns of hurt and frustration.

This begins with clarity.

A. Get clarity

The classic definition of a fool is the person who keeps doing the same thing and expects a different result. We all fall into this at one time or another, because we fail to step back and take an objective look at our situation.

1. Ask questions and journal

- a) What is it about the relationship that bothers you?
- b) How often does the problem or the pattern show itself?
- c) What seems to trigger it? Think of physical factors (hormones, pain, etc.) circumstantial factors (Christmas is coming, we get in an argument whenever we are going to my parents, kids are acting up or failing in school)
- d) How does the other person in the relationship typically respond when this pattern arises? Do they blame, accuse, clam up, argue, lose their temper, push, curse, shove?
- e) How do you typically respond when this pattern arises? Do you become defensive, do you cry, curse, yell... Do you make things better or worse with your response?

2. Seek another person's perspective

I would strongly recommend, because of our tendency to rationalize our behavior, that you get a wise friend, mentor or counselor to help you see your situation and yourself through someone else's eyes.

3. Ask God – Psalm 139:23-24 So often we can't get a clear picture of what is going on – what are we doing wrong, how are we contributing to the challenge of the relationship. When I need help in this area, I go to God for help. He says in James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all men generously and without reproach.

And I pray this prayer from Ps 139:23-24

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.

B. Take a hard look at your responses

Identify where your behavior is not constructive and creatively think of alternative behaviors that would move the situation or relationship in a different direction. This is not to say that the situation is your fault, but the great truth is that you have power to change the course of a relationship. So if you refuse to get into the yelling match, its hard to have a yelling match.

The only person you can change is yourself, so change how you respond to the difficult person. So often we want the other person to do the changing. We even wait for them to change before we will. Take initiative for the things you can actually do something about.

For example: If you know that Christmas is going to be a stressful time – a time of arguing, try to determine what you are going to do to reduce the stress of the situation. (By the way, in two weeks, Nov. 13, we will be talking about Avoiding Holiday Pitfalls).

Seek to understand them. They often feel misunderstood.

This is where Philippians 2:4 comes in... "Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others." – you want the Christmas lights up and he wants to watch the BIG game. We can be so demanding, and want things done right now, in our timing, and just how we want it done, not taking his desires into consideration. Would it be better to have no lights and a peaceful Christmas or strife and anger?

Put a **PAUSE** between what happens and your reaction.

There is a verse in the Bible – James 1:19 – Be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger.

Stephen Covey in his book "7 Habits..." says "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom."

C. Learn to wisely bring up issues

Find an emotionally safe, distraction-free environment where you can talk to the other person involved in this challenging relationship to try to get their perspective on the situation.

– **Don't try to solve things in the heat of the moment**

The big mistake we make is that the only time we seem to talk about the problems in our relationship is when we are mad.

If you have a relationship with a controlling mother – Pick a time when you are not exasperated, and it is a relatively calm time (we don't want to bring it up and cause problems but we need to). Pick a neutral location (don't give her home court advantage). State your frustration with the relationship, briefly and clearly (I would encourage you even to write out what you want to say and show it to someone else so you are crystal clear.)

– **Don't blame or accuse when you bring up the issue**

You may find the other person is as frustrated with the relationship as you are. Ask them to share their perspective on the relationship. Be prepared for different unpleasant responses:

– **Prepare yourself to control your emotions and your tendencies so you can listen – James 1:19-20**

- 1) they may not say anything, or say that your relationship is wonderful. If this happens you may need to say that you are not happy with the relationship as it is, and that at some point when she is ready to talk about it you would like to have a meaningful conversation with her. You don't change relationships with one conversation.
- 2) They may blame you for everything. They may come after you with a grocery list of accusations. DON'T LET YOURSELF GET DEFENSIVE. HEAR THEM OUT. Quietly, at the end of their words, say, "What I'm hearing is that you think it is all my fault." Pull out the things that they said that might be true. How do you think we can work together to work on our relationship. I would like our relationship to be satisfying to you and I would like it to be satisfying to me.
- 3) They may say "It's all my fault – I'm a terrible mother, I failed you...I'm sorry" This is pure manipulation. They are trying to make you feel guilty for bringing it up. They are hoping you will never bring it up again. DON'T FALL FOR IT. Your response – I'm sorry you feel that way. What do you think we can do to improve or make our relationship more healthy? (Stay right on point)

You may find that there is so much emotional noise in the relationship that you need a third party to bring some reconciliation.

Don't give up on the relationship after one attempt. I can hear you saying "I've tried that!"

A tip – If you are involved with an angry person, go to a public place like a restaurant to have this conversation. You will find that they can control their temper when there are people around

Note on abusive relationships:

Do not allow violence to continue.

Take steps for protection - Call 911, develop a safety plan, get help.

Proverbs 22:3

A prudent person foresees danger and takes precautions,
The simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences.

D. Develop positive steps

If the other person is up for it, develop an action plan to address the situation that is driving you crazy (Note: don't try to solve everything at once).

For example: When Steve says we need to stop spending for the next couple of weeks. This would really drive me crazy. I'd feel blamed and that it wasn't really my fault. I was thinking that Steve was really the irresponsible one (By the way, Steve and I have talked about this so he knows what I am saying). In this situation, the time to talk about it is not when the emotions are raw, but a week or so later when I could let him know how it hit me. "It might help if we talked about this once a week so that I don't get surprised.

- **Try to talk at a time when the emotions are calm so you can seek creative solutions**

Get the emotions out of the way, so you can have clarity for creative solutions

III. The power of God in challenging relationships

Matthew 19:26 *With God all things are possible*

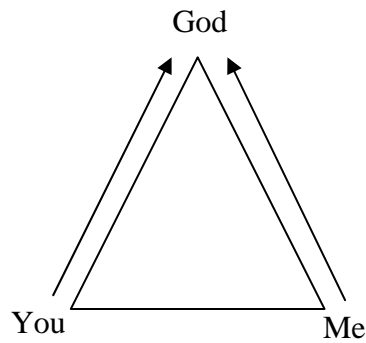
- A. He can transform you. The best way to change a situation is to change myself.

When you believe in Jesus Christ, He changes you. You begin the process of becoming more like Jesus. (If you would like to know more about how faith in Jesus Christ can change your life, talk to me or any of the women here with a nametag afterwards.) He is the one who changes my heart and helps me be loving and forgiving, instead of angry and resentful.

- B. He can give you strength to endure difficult situations and people with grace and patience.

- C. Through prayer He can actually bring change in your situation or relationship. I can't change anybody, and when I learned that in our marriage, our marriage got better.

- D. When both of you have a relationship with God, the closer you grow in your relationship with God the closer you will grow together in your relationship with each other.



- E. Since God designed us, He knows us better than we know ourselves, and He knows how to make relationships work.

God gives us wisdom in the Bible that tells us how to live in relationships.

- **The wisdom of kindness, forgiveness, a gentle answer, and personal responsibility are truths that can transform challenging relationships**

Conclusion: There is hope