

Transcript of Sermon By
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First Baptist Church
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**No Ordinary Relationships:
What To Do When the House Is On Fire**

Matthew 5:21-26

Meditation Text:

Blame has become the all-purpose excuse to do nothing.

—Charles E. Sykes in *A Nation of Victim*

Who among us has never had at least one relationship when we wondered what went wrong, and to this day, we have no idea what happened. Perhaps when you were in college, you had a roommate that you thought you were getting along with splendidly, but then the roommate announced one morning, “By the way, I am going to be moving next semester and you will need to find someone else to help share this apartment and I am taking the bedspreads and the curtains with me.” You thought everything was going so well, and you never did figure out what happened there.

You are a young married couple, you had some friends and then it just seemed like they quit calling. You would see them out someplace and it would seem like they were ducking you. To this day, you cannot figure out what on earth you did. What happened?

One day at breakfast your spouse says, “I have decided I don’t love you anymore.” You think, *I know I am still asleep and this is not real.* “What did you say?”

I said, “I don’t love you anymore.”

You can’t believe what you are hearing. You don’t have a clue.

Which of us has not had a relationship where something drastic happened, and to this day, we have no earthly idea how it got to the place it was or we know exactly how it got to the place it was but we do not know how to fix it.

Perhaps you have a brother who holds it against you because he feels, in some way, you turned the parents against him. It is your fault, and he blames you. You don’t know what you could have done. You try to figure out how to go back and make up with that brother. You have tried a number of different ways and you don’t know what to do.

Maybe harsh words were spoken in the car in front of the kids. The words just hung out there, and nobody could figure out how to take them back. The words just rub on the family like a bed sore and won't be healed. We don't know what to do.

Maybe there is a relationship that disappoints. There are more ways than there are people here to think of relationships that have just disappointed us. *What did I do? What happened?*

I tried to go back and think about this. All of my life has been lived in an era in which relationships, in some form or fashion, have been in crisis. As a child, I grew up watching Civil Rights demonstrations, problems, and issues on television. What are we going to do with each other? It was a relationship that we were, and to some degree still are, trying to determine what to do.

As a teenager, there was that quaint expression "a generation gap." It seemed so profound at the time. It seems silly now, but the principle still exists. Parents are trying to figure out how to understand their kids; kids are saying their parents never understand and never pay attention to them.

We live in an age of rage where someone would just as soon wreck their car as let you get in front of them in the left lane or something has happened that they take a gun to school or work. People are just so angry with everything.

People often want to quote the divorce statistics and talk about a lack of commitment. It just seems to me that family is asked to carry too heavy a burden sometimes, and the results are sometimes in those statistics. If relationships were a house, then we might say that the house is on fire. We live in an era where the house is on fire. I think it is a good image because it speaks of crisis and emergency. If you turn on the evening news, it seems to me at least once a week there has been some fire in Atlanta on the evening news where you can watch somebody being interviewed about what they did with the fire.

Person No. 1 panicked. They left. They did not take anything. "All I have are the clothes on my back. I didn't know what to do. I just ran out the door."

Person No. 2 was paralyzed. "I saw it and I did not know what to do. There wasn't anything I could do. I didn't know what to do." You are thinking, *How many times are you going to say that?*

Person No. 3 is angry and wants to blame somebody. "I am going to blame the electrician who came and worked on the air conditioner. I am going to blame the landlord because the wiring was unsafe. I am going to blame the fire department because they did not get there on time."

Person No. 4 demonstrates a heroic risk. I can think of the wildfires out west that are moving toward populated areas. I can see the man standing with only his garden hose on the edge of his house watering his roof trying to keep all those fallen embers from catching fire, heroically risking it all. As long as he has breath, he is going to try to save something.

I think these are pretty good illustrations of how people respond to the house fire of relationship emergency.

Over the next two months in worship, we are going to be looking for biblical guidance about how Christ can lead us to have relationships that are above the ordinary. Jesus speaks about abundant life. “I came that they might have life and have it abundantly.” It seems to me that if we can allow Christ to apply these things in our lives, we can come up with relationships that are elevated above the ones that are just common stance, the ones that happen every day that apply abundant life to our relationships and are more than ordinary relationships.

Did you know that in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus’ first teachings are about relationships? In the beginning of the 5th chapter, Jesus talks about relationships with people to whom we are the closest to. He uses the words, “your brother” many times. Of course, this was written in an age when people just used the male pronoun, but it would apply to your brother, your sister, your friend or your family. At the end of the Gospel, Jesus returns to relationships but this time it is relationships with strangers. How are you going to treat the people that you don’t know that you encounter every day? What are you going to do with these people? Life is about relationships. Somehow our encounter with God should have some affect on the way that we treat each other—our siblings, our spouse, our parents, our children (whether they are small and at home or whether they are adults). The way we relate to God has some impact on the way that we treat each other.

Did you hear carefully verses 23 and 24? “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister had something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift.” That is quite a statement for a preacher to make. Don’t give your offering until you have gone and made up.

The way we hear this is *if we have something against our brother or sister*, but that is not what it says. Jesus has said many times in the Gospels what we are supposed to do if we have a problem with someone. If I am at fault, I am supposed to repent. If you are at fault, I am supposed to forgive, but this is an entirely different circumstance. He says, “If you are worshipping and you remember that someone has something against you, get up and go do something about it.” He does not say if it is your fault, their fault, or nobody’s fault. He just says if there is a problem, the most urgent thing in your life is to get up and go make peace.

I tried to find a sermon from a pastor friend of mine from several years ago. I remember the title as *Jesus’ Word to Victims*. We also live in an age where everybody wants to be a victim. It is always somebody else’s fault. My pastor friend used this text and he said that Jesus has no kind word to victims. There is no problem relationship in the Christian life in which we can absolve ourselves of the responsibility to do something. As Christians, there is no relationship where I don’t bear some part in trying to make things right. If, while making your offering, you remember that someone has something against you, leave your offering and go make peace. Jesus does not allow us to hide behind the idea that we were the wronged party. That is not what he says. As a Christian, if you remember that there is something broken or damaged in a

relationship, it is up to you to mend the relationship. You cannot say, "It is up to them." Each of us is responsible to get up, go, and do.

Imagine that we are in church and as we sing the first hymn, it reminds somebody in the balcony that someone has something against them. You see them walk down, come down to the floor level, and shake hands with somebody. Then comes the morning prayer and we bow our heads. When we lift our heads, there are two people over here shaking hands and hugging each other. One of them is crying.

During the scripture, three or four people come out of the choir and start talking to people, and finally they smile. During the sermon, 20 people get up and leave, and you think they are mad at me, but they come back with a smile on their faces.

I think Jesus is making an exaggeration here, but he moves on to say that if you have this problem you need to settle things before you go to court. If you go to court, the judge is going to turn you over to the guard, the guard is going to put you in jail, and you will stay there until you pay the last penny. This is not a word about whether or not Christians can use the legal system. This is the way that Jesus had of saying how urgent it is that we do something about these broken relationships. It is so urgent that it is as if there is going to come a moment where you will not be able to do something about it anymore. It will be like you are thrown in jail, and then it is too late. You should have taken the plea bargain. It is too late now. He said you need to go ahead and resolve things before it is too late.

I remember a story of a man who was studying eagles. There was some special eagle that was in a nest in a cave-like area on the side of a cliff. The cliff actually indented back, and the eagle's nest was in the indentation. The man scaled down a rope and managed to get his momentum to where he could swing over to the ledge. He secured the rope and did the study. As he was getting to leave, he let go of the rope. So that rope is starting to swing out. He realizes as it starts to come back that physics will indicate that rope is never going to be closer than the first time it comes back.

My experience in relationships is it is never going to be easier. It is never going to be easier to go and try to make amends than it is right now. That rope is always going to be settling a little further out. We think, *Maybe the wind will blow and send it back my way*, but it is always harder. As Christians, Jesus is saying to us that there is nothing more urgent than doing our part in trying to make amends in a relationship that is broken and damaged. Of course, we understand that Jesus is only asking us to do what God does for us. This is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. God did not wait for us to crawl back through a needle's eye of some demand that he has on us. He did not wait until we got all prettied up or got our lives right. God was in Christ, reconciling the world. While we were yet sinners, God sent his son. Jesus said, "I came to seek those that are lost." He came to bring us back. That is what he is asking us to do. As God is taking the initiative in Christ, he is asking us to take the initiative ourselves and say, "I want to do my part to make this right."

Maybe it is worth cutting a golf game in half and coming home early to make amends with the neighbor that you got upset with because he brought the lawnmower back broken.

Maybe it is worth turning off the TV or video games, putting down a book, or whatever it may be to say, “I don’t want to let another minute go by until we can make peace. I love you too much to let this go on.”

What peace there would be if everybody dropped everything because they remembered somebody they needed to make amends with in order to reconcile ourselves to one another.

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