**Series OVERVIEW**

 *“Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” -Matthew 22:37-39*

The most important things in life are relationships… a relationship with God and relationships with others. What are your relationship goals?

We all long for strong, stable, solid relationships. But how do we build them?

Each week of this series we’ll examine an aspect of relating to others that can help us grow closer to our relationship goals. And we’ll learn that a loving relationship with God is the foundation that equips us to love others.

**Week 1  | April 28, 2019 | Connection Goals**

***Benevolence Offering Weekend***

**Scripture: Genesis 2:25, Genesis 3:1-13, Genesis 3:21, Galatians 3:26-27**

**Message Big Idea**

The only on-ramp to connection in relationships is vulnerability.

*Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. -Genesis 2:25*

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”* *2 The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,3 but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”* *4 “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. 5 “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”* *6 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.* *8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?”* *10 He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked;so I hid.”* *11 And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”* *12 The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”* *13 Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”* *The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” -Genesis 3:1-13*

*The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. -Genesis 3:21*

*26 So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. -Galatians 3:26-27*

**Message Description**

We were designed to connect with others, and not just on a surface level. We were designed to know and be truly known. The reason loneliness is an epidemic is that so many of us don’t feel known. We can be surrounded by a sea of people and still feel disconnected. How do we find the connection we long for?

The only on-ramp to connection in relationships is vulnerability.

The author Brené Brown defines vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure.” It’s when we show our true selves, reveal the things we would rather hide, and open ourselves up to judgement and shame. So naturally this is something we all avoid.

In Genesis 2:25, before the fall, both Adam and Eve were naked (“arum” in Hebrew) and they felt no shame. This is how we were created — to be vulnerable (naked) and NOT be shameful about it.

But then came the fall. In Genesis 3:1-13, the serpent comes and tricks them with lies. Adam and Eve eat the apple and their eyes are “opened” and “they knew they were naked.” Adam tells God, “I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid.”

This hiding is shame. Shame stems from an acute awareness of our vulnerability (and the resulting lie that we are not enough) — and so we try to hide.

There are lots of ways we hide.

* Achievement.
* Humor.
* Anger.
* Distance.
* Religion

But if we are ever going to connect with those we love in meaningful ways, we have to come out of hiding. We have to be vulnerable.

C.S. Lewis writes: “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.” -*The Four Loves*

What can empower us to take steps to be vulnerable? First and foremost, grasping that we are loved and accepted by God. Just as God clothed Adam and Eve in the garden, he has now clothed us with Christ (Galatians 3:27). We are perfectly, wholly, and unconditionally accepted. Grounding ourselves in the unshakeable nature of God’s love gives us the courage to be vulnerable with others.

In this message, we’ll want to give some practical takeaways on how people can take steps of vulnerability in their most important relationships. We need some baby steps. We need some more challenging steps. We’ll also want to point out that the level of vulnerability should match the level of your relationship. Being vulnerable does not mean spilling your guts to every person.

Brene Brown might have some practical suggestions and here are some other websites to check:

<https://ask.metafilter.com/317840/Exercises-to-build-openness-to-vulnerability>

<https://medium.com/swlh/taking-advantage-of-vulnerability-exercises-fca4b4f1045a>

<https://www.twrwomenofhope.org/message-archive/7-exercises-to-practice-vulnerability/>

**Docent Requests**:

* Intro/hook ideas that set up the Big Idea
* Arum - word study on this Hebrew term used not only for “naked” but also as the descriptions of the “crafty” serpent. Is there significance that this is the same Hebrew word?
* Commentary on the Genesis passages that fits the above Big Idea.
* Quotes and/or short (2-4 minute) video clips from Brene Brown on vulnerability.
* Practical suggestions from Brene Brown on taking steps to be vulnerable.
* Any interesting insight on the brain science/physiology of vulnerability (good or bad)

**Week 2  | May 5, 2019 | Conflict Goals**

**Scripture: Romans 12:18, Ephesians 4:26-27, Luke 9:23, Philippians 2:3-8, John 13:3-5, Matthew 5:38-39, Matthew 5:23-24, Matthew 18:21-22**

**Message Big Idea**

**C**onflict is inevitable, how we respond is our choice. Conflict is not something to avoid; it’s an opportunity to follow Jesus the peacemaker.

*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. -Romans 12:18*

*“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*

*23 Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. -Luke 9:23*

*3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.* *5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:* *6 Who, being in very nature God,* *did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;* *7 rather, he made himself nothing* *by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.* *8 And being found in appearance as a man,* *he humbled himself* *by becoming obedient to death—* *even death on a cross! -Philippians 2:3-8*

*Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. -John 13:3-5*

*38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ 39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.” -Matthew 5:38-39*

*23 “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.” -Matthew 5:23-24*

*21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”*

*22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. -Matthew 18:21-22*

**Message Description**

Sometimes we think the goal is to avoid conflict, but that’s not actually helpful. If you never have conflict in your closest relationships, someone is likely hiding their true feelings.

In healthy relationships, conflict is neither bad or good...it’s inevitable. What matters is how you navigate conflict with those you love. Perhaps we all need to set some “Conflict Goals.” How can conflict provide an opportunity for you to grow in Christlikeness as a peacemaker?

For this message, we plan to use ideas from this “Move Together” message from Woodland Hills church ([https://whchurch.org/sermon/move-together/#](https://whchurch.org/sermon/move-together/)) as a springboard for ideas. The following is a summary of the discussion between pastor Greg Boyd and psychologist Kevin Callaghan.

We are called to be “peacemakers,” to be the one bringing peace (shalom) to all our relationships (Romans 12:18). However, when a conflict occurs, it’s hard not to just get sucked into escalating it. Why?

We are all born with deep longings. We are all raised in brokenness where we’ve been wounded. Our past experience color our interpretations of current interactions...we enter into conflicts with “wound-based filters.” For example if you go to adopt a dog from a shelter, when you first try to pet it, it might wag, or it may snarl, depending on what kind of past experiences that dog has had. When he snarls, you know this dog has been hurt in the past. He interprets a human hand reaching out for him as a threat. In this example, that dog is reacting out of a wound-based filter. Our wound-based filters basically mean that we all have buttons just waiting to be pushed, so we come into every situation in an “irritate-able” or “offend-able” state. Our pump is primed for conflict.

**The Conflict Cycle**

There are 5 basic elements to the conflict cycle. This cycle is what keeps us striking at each other over and over.

1) Rights

In a conflict situation, our concern over our own personal rights cause us to become self-centered, our rights become like entitlements. A conflict begins when we feel that someone has stepped on our rights in some way. When we view our rights as inalienable, they can feel almost sacred, so we go to great lengths to defend them. Our rights (and our belief in our entitlement them) become a form of power over the other person.

2) Reactions

When we sense our rights are being violated, our amygdala becomes activated and we will react. We experience an inner reaction of negative feelings, thoughts, and impulses; and our past wounds may amplify these feelings. Imagine carrying a glass filled very full with wine and being bumped into. Our past wounds tend to be the wine. Author and theologian NT Wright said it this way: “When you’re jolted, what spills out is whatever is filling you.” When you’re suddenly put to the test and don’t have time to think about how you’re coming across, your real nature will come out.

3) Revenge

Revenge is the desire to get back at the person and make them pay. Our fallen understanding of the idea of justice mistakenly thinks justice means making somebody pay for wrongdoing. (That is not justice; it’s retribution, thinking the other person needs to feel as bad as I do.) And since we feel that they have stepped on our rights, we think we now have “the right” to make them feel equally bad or worse. This can look like fighting, or it can look like a passive punishment like a cold shoulder. Both are ways of making the person pay. Brain science actually proves that revenge activates our brain’s pleasure centers. It does make us feel better. But of course, it only makes the conflict worse.

4) Rumors (Gossip)

Rumors are in a sense, another form of revenge, but they are also their own phase of the conflict cycle. If you are assertive and confident, you can go to talk directly to the person who wronged you. But often we will be conflict-avoidant, so we talk to others instead of the primary person. We tell our side of the story, wanting the jury of public opinion to convict the other person and acquit me. It’s an example of our desire to be right. But this “rightness” is an illusion, since don’t forget that the person you had the conflict with is most likely doing the very same thing, about you! In either case, all gossip does is fuel resentments. When you gossip about your conflict with someone else it actually makes you relive the experience and feel all those negative emotions even more strongly. So, far from healing a conflict, gossip actually exacerbates it. We CAN however talk about a situation with another person if we are actually seeking wise counsel. So if you need to discuss your conflict with another person, invite your confidant to challenge your point of view, or suggest things you can change in yourself to heal the rift. Sometimes the distinction can be subtle, but in general, when you are focusing on the other person’s flaws or wrongdoing, you’re gossiping. But when you are focusing on your own flaws or wrongdoings with the goal of finding peace and resolution, that’s is seeking counsel and is helpful.

5) Resentments

These are what’s left over after the previous four phases of conflict. It’s a cesspool of negativity, grudges and unforgiveness. Unforgiveness is like “drinking poison and hoping the other person dies.” Resentments cause our next interaction to go badly, adding to our mound of wound-based filters, priming us for the next conflict. The resentments we carry are the fuel that keeps this whole conflict cycle going. This is why in Ephesians 4:26-27 Paul tells us to not let the sun go down on your anger — he’s referring to this insidious submerged anger and bitterness. When you stuff it down, it festers, and you give the devil a foothold.

**Jesus’ Five Conflict-Breaking Principles**

The 5 elements of conflict all reinforce each other. But Jesus addresses every one of the stages of this cycle with kingdom-based cycle-breaking principles. We aren’t called to just “navigate” conflict, we are called to a whole new way of living as peacemakers.

1) Self-Denial

Jesus teaches to deny yourself and take up your cross, laying down your life for your enemy (Luke 9:23). To be sure this also means letting go of our rights. When your rights are violated, self denial says “let it go.” It’s almost the exact opposite of what the world teaches us (defending our rights). Instead, Jesus instructs us to lay down our rights and our life, considering others to be as just as important as yourself. He modeled this (Philippians 2:3-8).

Note: Turning the other cheek is not the same as being a doormat. A doormat does so out of fear. But self-denial is done out of love.

2) Security in Christ

This is the product of plugging into God as the source of your identity. If you get all of your security in Jesus, you will not need to defend your status of being “right” — you will have the courage to potentially look weak or flawed or wrong which is the very thing that can help us to let it go when someone violates our rights. Jesus gives us an example of this the night before he was crucified. In John 13:3, he knew who he was and where he was going — his identity in God was solid. Because of that he was able to kneel down and wash the feet of his disciples.

3) Sacrificial Suffering

This is the primary tenet that Jesus calls us to in our life: be willing to endure suffering for sake of others. A willingness to suffer allows us to enter into relationships in brand new way. When I am willing to accept pain from you, I am not going to jump up to protect myself. I am going to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:38-39). God accepts pain from us every day. Love bears all things/endures all things.

But again this is not the same as letting yourself get beaten up over and over again, since that is not best for the other person and is usually based in fear not sacrificial suffering. Love sometimes let’s go as a loving response.

4) Seeking Reconciliation

In Matthew 5:24 Jesus tells us not to go to the altar if you are fighting with your brother, first go and be reconciled. The anti-conflict opposite of gossip is going to the other person directly and talking about your conflict, with the purpose of finding resolution. No matter who caused the breach, it’s up to you to take the initiative to resolve it.

Sometimes the other person that you are in conflict with is not able to work with you to find resolution, so whether you can get there or not, that is why in all situations we have Jesus’ rule #5:

5) Forgiveness

In the Bible the number 7 represents completion, fullness. So, when Jesus in Matthew 18:22 tells his disciples to forgive 7 x 70 times, he is saying to make forgiveness infinite and never-ending. EVERY time you are wronged, let it go and forgive. Forgiveness does not need to be earned, the other person does not need to repent. After all, God unilaterally forgives us, he does not wait for us to repent first. Not only does forgiving follow God’s model but it also is for our own good. Releasing that heavy debt of “you owe me” frees us from carrying around resentment, thus depriving the cycle of its fuel.

With God as our sole source of life, and these tools that Jesus gives us, we can step back and view conflict as an opportunity to be a peacemaker.

**Docent Requests**:

* Intro/hook ideas that set up the Big Idea
* Commentary on key passages.
* Case studies of instances when conflict avoidance was detrimental to a team or task.
* Key learnings from the Woodland Hills sermon.
* Misconceptions about conflict and where those ideas come from.
* Reasons we avoid conflict.
* Any interesting insight on the brain science/physiology of conflict (good or bad)

**Week 3  | May 12, 2019 | Communication Goals
*Mother’s Day***

**Scripture: James 1:19, Proverbs 18:13, Luke 18:35-43**

**Message Big Idea**

Because we are heard by God, we can grow as a listener.

*My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry… -James 1:19*

*“To answer before listening—that is folly and shame.” (NIV)  “Answering before listening is both stupid and rude.” (Message) -Proverbs 18:13*

*35 As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.36 When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening. 37 They told him, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.”* *38 He called out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”* *39 Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”* *40 Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him, 41 “What do you want me to do for you?”* *“Lord, I want to see,” he replied.* *42 Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.”43 Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God. -Luke 18:35-43*

**Message Description**

Few things can wreak havoc in our relationships more than a breakdown in communication. When we don’t communicate well, we’re left feeling unheard, unvalued, and unknown. If we want to reach our Relationship Goals, we need to pay attention to our Communication Goals.

Acknowledge that part of the problem is speaking up… but today we’re focusing on listening. as the key to healthy communication. In James 1:19 God is saying he wants us to lead with our ears and not with our mouth.

Listening is different than hearing. One way to illustrate this would be to take 30 seconds to be silent in the middle of the talk. Ask: What did you hear? People may name traffic outside, the HVAC system, etc. Those sounds were there all along. In fact, our brains heard them before. People were filtering them out because they were concentrating on listening to the Teaching Pastor. There is a difference between hearing and listening. Much of the time what happens in our relationships is we’re hearing someone but we’re not listening because we’re not fully focused on them.

We’ll want to address some of the barriers to listening. A few that come to mind…

* Self-centeredness - “Good listening starts with the scandalous premise that this conversation is not about you.” Adam S. McHugh, *The Listening Life*
* Assumptions - Rather than trying to understand what a person is saying, we assume we already know. When someone shares a problem, we often go into “fix-it” mode. Most people aren’t asking for your strategy for their problem; they are looking for support as they navigate their problem. We fail people when we try to heal them before we hear them.
* Cultural Validation - In our culture, the ones who are given the authority, given the place of power are the ones who talk, not the ones who listen. We think we need to be the loudest person in the room to be heard.

In Jesus’ interactions with people, he was the opposite of all of these barriers. In this message we’ll look at one example of Jesus as a listener in the story of the blind beggar (Luke 18:35-43). Jesus was other-centered (he stopped even though he had an important schedule ahead of him). He didn’t make assumptions (he asked a question...something he did often). Jesus didn’t look to people for his validation, his identity was grounded in his relationship with his Father.

We will want to provide some practical tips for becoming an effective listener. Ideally give people a “next step” they can do today to practice listening in their most important relationships.

Ultimately, there is a direct correlation between my connection to God and my ability to connect (to listen) to other people. God is the one who can fill us up. When we are not connected to him, we start looking to people to fill what we need.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said: “...he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life...Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies.”

We can grow as a listener when we grasp that we are heard by God.

Some possible resources:

Six Lessons in Good Listening

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/six-lessons-in-good-listening>

How to Become a Good Listener

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-to-become-a-good-listener>

Key and Peele - Text Confusion (For a concept idea...not this actual video) :)

<https://vimeo.com/121923151?fbclid=IwAR3qzvmyI0Zm_rXXpPPz_SoNof2D8bZOsHIHaUoGU_1nNq2Vxic_swx0CeA>

**Docent Requests**:

* Intro/hook ideas that set up the Big Idea
* Commentary on key passages
* Material from spiritual writers on Jesus as an effective listener.
* Any interesting insight on the brain science/physiology of communication (good or bad)
* Spiritual practices of communicating.

**Week 4  | May 19, 2019 | Commitment Goals**

**Scripture: 1 John 3:18, Romans 5:5, Genesis 29 (Jacob and Rachel)**

**Message Big Idea**

We were not created to master commitment outside of our connection to God.

*Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. -1 John 3:18*

*And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. -Romans 5:5*

**Message Description**

Everything we’ve talked about connecting, conflict, communication apply to marriage. What we’re going to talk about today applies to many different relationships as well, but we want to focus on marriage.

Great romance starts with the reality that love at its core is an action not a feeling. To build a strong and lasting romance, it takes intention on the part of both partners. Think of it like a relational bank account. Things we do or don’t do to make that person feel special or loved are deposits in their account. Conversely, things we do or don’t do that result in the person feeling angry or hurt are withdrawals. In order for us to have great romantic relationships, we need to be cognizant of the balance in our significant other’s relational bank account.

Perhaps the most helpful tool in helping us understand this love in action is the 5 Love Languages. In this message, we’ll review these 5 Love Languages to help married couples understand that intentionally loving their spouse in the way their spouse receives love can strengthen their marriage.

It could be great in this message to have people take a “5 Love Languages” quiz right in service if we can find one short enough.

Ultimately, what will empower each of us to love our significant other well is to allow God to be the one who fills our relational bank account. Simply put, we were not created to master romance outside of our connection to God. When the intentional community Adam and Eve experienced – the relational connectedness – was shattered by sin, they immediately started making massive withdrawals – they experienced relational bankruptcy. They had nothing. They started blaming each other. And we’re no different. When we get right with God – put our trust in him, he pours his love into our hearts empowering us to pour out love to our spouse making it possible for both of us to experience great romance.

Here are a couple of resources that we can draw from for this talk:

* [Great Romance](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1egFr_OKCGZW8dJ9EL-ei8DHtiJAg4mu4) - A previous Community message. (Includes an illustration of Jacob and Rachel and the 5 Love Languages).
* [5 Love Languages (Couples)](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1XuzeWkD0pouo_gq__oajJv4xLmvE5Icc) - Tonia Koss’ notes from the breakout she taught on this topic at the Together Conference.

Additional Resources on Marriage that might help in setting up this talk:

John Gottman (award-winning psychologist). The Gottman Institute.

6 Things that predict divorce

<https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-6-things-that-predict-divorce/>

Top 7 ways to improve your marriage

<https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-top-7-ways-to-improve-your-marriage/>

**Docent Requests**:

* Intro/hook ideas that set up the Big Idea
* Recent stats on marriage, divorce… anything to illustrate how people are trying to have “commitment goals” (and often struggling at it).
* Find options for an online 5 Love Languages quiz that can be taken on a phone in a couple minutes.
* Takeaways from the suggested resources.
* Ways Christian marriages should look differently than other marriages.