

Adult Ministries

Marriage Ministries Lessons 2023

By Ángel Rodríguez Gómez
Mesoamerica Region

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Church of the Nazarene
Mesoamerica Region



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Study guide for couples

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Presentation

The Nazarene Discipleship International (NDI) of the Church of the Nazarene is organized by developing Adult Ministries, Youth Ministries, and Children's Ministries.

This material is a guide to Marriage Ministries from NDI and aims to help members of the Church of the Nazarene learn biblical teaching on the holy life of marriage, and put it into practice in their daily lives, in order to grow in the likeness of Jesus Christ.

The areas of this ministry for marriages and its objectives are as follows:

A. *Spiritual area:*

- Motivate couples to be consecrated under the direction of the Holy Spirit.
- Do personal evangelism with other couples.
- Strengthen the worship of God and devotional life.

B. *Ministerial area:*

- Recognize that marriages have a responsibility for the preservation and growth of the work of God.
- Work on building the family and church.
- Help couples serve in the church.

C. *Family area:*

- Build your home on the principles and values of the Kingdom of God as shown in the Bible.
- Apply biblical principles and values to a good marital relationship.
- Apply biblical principles and values to parenting.

The book contains 12 lessons that can be shared one per month at couples' meetings. Each lesson contains:

Learning objectives.

They refer to the achievements expected of the student at the end of the study of the lesson.

Introduction.

It's an initial presentation that contextualizes the topic to be addressed in order to engage the learners in the topic.

Theme development.

These lessons have been written in simple, dynamic language connected with the ideas of the contemporary world in order to facilitate their use for teaching.

Conclusion of the main teaching.

At the end of each lesson, a brief conclusion of what has been taught is provided, which can be used at the end of the class as a closing, and in the next session to remind the students of the topics covered.

Dynamics or activities.

Individual or group learning activities or dynamics related to the subject studied are suggested. These can be reproduced for the participants, although it's best that each participant has their own book.

Lesson 1. **THE DNA** *of relationships*

Biblical Text: John 15:4-5

⁴ *Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.*

⁵ *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*

Objectives:

- **Seek** every day to improve our relationship with God, which is the starting point to improve our healthy relationships.
 - **Take care** that sin doesn't enter our lives.
-

1.1 Introduction

For each family, the home should be a place of love, shelter, security, protection, peace and companionship. At the end of a long day at work, we return home looking forward to spending the rest of the day with our family. However, many homes, far from shelters, are battlefields. What has failed?

One of the things we must learn is that our whole life (with family, with church members, with friends, with others in general) is based on relationships. Hence, it's of great importance to have the tools to cultivate, in a personal and family way, healthy relationships with God, with oneself, and with others.

In this chapter, we're going to see what is the DNA that sustains healthy relationships that help us to build a home where God's grace flows permanently. Without a doubt, the skills that we develop at home will help us to build bridges with other people.

1.2 Development

1.2.1 The crisis in relationships

Gary Smalley (2005: 13,14) helps us see that today the world without God is submerged in a series of unhealthy relationships, where each person seeks their personal good. This sounds very harsh, and some or many may not agree, but it's enough to take a look around us to form our own judgment about it. Let's think about some situations that happen everyday:

- Increase in marriages ending in divorce.
- Adolescents or young people who become pregnant, but who, when informing their partner, leaves them alone and runs away from their responsibility.
- A father who remains absent from the upbringing of the children, causing a lack of affection and other damage that lasts for a long time in their life.
- The husband who exerts violence on his wife and children.

- The man who, despite earning little at his job, tends to waste part of his income on drink or other vices, regardless of whether or not he fulfills his family responsibilities.
- Men who, when they divorce, fight for not fulfilling their obligation to provide for the support of their children, who are oblivious to their problems.
- Children who are looking for a way to get out of their home because they can no longer stand the family environment.
- The employer who pays an unfair salary to accumulate wealth, without adequately rewarding his workers.
- The mistreatment (bullying) exerted by students on some classmates.
- Hostile relationships in the workplace.

Only a few everyday evils have been mentioned, but you can think of even worse situations like human trafficking, drug sales, etc.

Now, it's worth reflecting on whether these situations only occur with people who don't know Christ as their personal Savior. Do any of the situations described above occur among believers? Let's think about some of them:

- Is there any type of violence in the homes of Christian families?
- Are there divorces in Christian families?
- Are there cases of adultery in Christians?
- Does the family environment in Christian homes not present difficulties with their relationships with each other?
- Do you know of cases where a young Christian woman has been made pregnant and left alone?
- Have you heard of a church that has suffered a division?

As can be seen, not only people who aren't yet Christians need to improve their relationships, but even those of us who have recognized Christ as our personal Savior do as well.

The reason for these damaged relationships has its explanation in the Garden of Eden. When God created man, he thought of making him a companion "so that he would not be alone." His perfect design then involves a life in communion, based on healthy relationships. God Himself visited them and cared for them. However, the biblical story tells us that the humans fell into sin by disobeying God and eating from the tree of good and evil. From that moment on, relations deteriorated.

Note that:

- The relationship with God was damaged. After they disobeyed God, He went to visit them. But they were afraid and hid from Him. They could no longer have that relationship that they had before. They lost the harmonious relationship with God.
- The relationship between them deteriorated. Now they were afraid, they felt insecure, and they didn't want to face God.
- The relationship between themselves was damaged. Adam blamed Eve for having disobeyed. At the same time Eve blamed the serpent.
- Even the relationship concerning care for the environment was damaged, although due to the limited scope of this Manual, this aspect will not be addressed.

1.2.2 The Relational Nature of God

Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson (2008:26) state that God's nature is communal. They consider the following principles in their argument:

1. God exists in community as three persons in one: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (H.S.).
2. God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, whose transforming relationships are a model for us, his disciples. In his earthly ministry, Jesus was accompanied by twelve men, to whom were added women who served him. He was involved in multiple relationships throughout his earthly ministry.
3. Jesus prays to the Father for the unity of all Christians. He made it clear to us that the greatest commandment is to love God with all of your heart, with all of your being, and with all of your mind, while the second is to love your neighbor as yourself. This is what should move the disciple who has been transformed by his grace.

Central ideas of this theological account highlight the incarnation. Jesus, being God, stripped himself of his deity to bring us salvation. At the same time, he gave us an example of what we must do in the work of transformational development to restore the relationship with God and with others. Salvation isn't only about spiritual things; it involves all areas of the human being. So all transformative development must be framed by the cross and the broken Christ. His example of stripping himself of everything should be the one that models the life of each one in favor of transformative development.

Finally, B. Myers emphasizes that the purpose of the biblical account focuses on restoring relationships that were damaged in the fall. Those relationships between the person and God, the person with himself, the relationships with others (the community), and even the relationships with the environment that surrounds us. This will be accomplished by having a life of fellowship with Christ.

1.2.3 THE DNA of relationships

Gary Smalley (2005:21) points out that the DNA code of relationships is contained in three principles:

- We were created to have bonds or relationships.
- We were created with the ability to choose.
- We were created to take responsibility for ourselves.

We'll address these aspects below.

A. God designed us as relational beings

God designed us to be relational beings. Those relationships include:

- Our personal relationship with God.
- Our relationship with oneself.
- Our relationship with others.

All these relationships are intrinsically connected to each other, as well as being very important. If any one of these relationships is out of balance, it will affect the others.

A preponderant symptom of a family, and therefore of a healthy church (Galloway, 2002:40), is relationships of Christian love. (John 13:35). These love relationships aren't only for the family, the church, but must transcend every relationship that the disciple has. This includes those who haven't yet received Christ as their personal savior.

Stephen Macchia (2002:115) points out that "The healthy church deliberately aims to foster interpersonal relationships that are expressed in love between families, between its members, and towards the community it serves".

Then Donahue and Robinson (2008:44) emphasize that in addition to being designed for a life in community, God also designed us to live in interdependence. (Gen. 2:18, 21-24; Eph. 5:28,31). They then describe the blessings received through the community:

- Strength is received to face the storms of life.
- Wisdom is received for important decisions.
- Responsibility is experienced, which is vital for growth.
- Acceptance is found, which helps to restore wounds.

In all of this, it must be clear who we are. We're human beings created in the image of God. We have a relational God who designed us to be the same way. We're integral beings who live as part of a community that must seek that communion that Jesus modeled for his own, a shalom community where love, justice and peace must prevail in all our relationships. For this we must be in Christ. We must focus on cultivating the character (the being), so that we can then do what the Father asks of us. We must then be bearers of the gospel for all.

B. We were created with the ability to choose.

God created us with the ability to choose. But we can't always choose our relationships. For example, we cannot choose our parents, siblings, or our children, but we can choose how we'll act in those relationships. Gary Smalley (2005: 33,34) points out that:

- You can choose to be stuck in a relationship or decide to work on problem areas.
- You can choose to stay in a resentment or face the resentment and let go of it.
- You can choose to hurt the other person, or you can make a decision to analyze the causes of the problems behind that hurt and heal it.
- You can choose to look at yourself in a mirror that distorts you, or you can choose to see yourself as God sees you.

C. Choosing equals changing.

When we choose to work to establish healthy relationships, there will always be things to change. Many times, making a choice is difficult. But we have to choose changes even when they create fear or insecurity. What do you choose today? Do you choose to act in a way that harms your relationships, or improves them? We must be aware that our choices affect all areas of our lives. Not choosing is already a choice in itself. If we decide not to make a change, we're actually choosing; there is change without my participation.

D. We were created to take responsibility for ourselves.

Within the free will that God gave us is taking responsibility for our actions and choices. Unfortunately, it's easier to fall into the pattern established in the Garden of Eden: blame the other person. God has made us to relate with one another. We can't change this. The only choice is to work on making these relationships great or allow them to bring great pain to yourself and others.

Therefore, we must choose wisely. We must choose the abundant life that Christ offers us. We must be prepared to take responsibility for making decisions, even the most difficult ones, that can bring joy, peace, and fulfillment to our relationships. "Life consists of relationships, everything else is just details," says G. Smalley (2005: 37).

1.2.4 Our relationship with God as a starting point

Our whole life will always depend on the personal relationship we have with God. We must then begin to analyze what our current relationship with Him is like. Kelly Kopic (2016) mentions that:

Interpersonal relationships aren't "things" to be achieved; they're more about "being" than "doing." They need attention, mutual exchange, and attention in order to flourish. Relationships cannot be sources of life-giving force if we aren't present in them and for them. Communion with God is a deep need of every human being, whether we recognize that need or not. Communion with God is how we were created to function, and it's ultimately about a very loving, very present relationship with the triune Creator.

So how can we know God better?

The **first step** in establishing a relationship with God is accepting Christ as our personal Savior. The Bible tells us in 1 Timothy 2:5 that there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. It should also be emphasized that in this relationship, God is the one who takes the initiative. He gave his Son Jesus to reconcile us with Himself. God is the one who seeks us through his prevenient grace. The question now is whether we have already responded to that prevenient grace and have accepted Jesus as our personal savior.

Then, the **second step** is to get to know him personally. As in any relationship, both parties must know each other for the relationship to work properly. You will be interested to know how God sees you. Rick Warren (Smalley, 2005: 30,31) describes how God sees each one of us:

- To Him, we aren't an accident. Our birth wasn't a mistake or a causal event.
- God designed us before our parents conceived us.
- He uniquely made our bodies exactly the way He wanted.
- He also determined the natural talents and unique personality that we have.
- God created each of us for a purpose.
- He never does anything by accident and never makes mistakes.
- God loves us and values us, to the degree of giving the life of his Son for us. John 3:16

Well, I hope this comforts and excites you greatly. It's an excellent start in a relationship with God. Don't you think so? Now it's up to us to know Him. In every relationship, it's necessary to invest time with each other. For this, He has provided us with a series of spiritual disciplines that allow us to know God better through Christ. If you want to go deeper into the subject, we recommend you read the Spiritual Formation in the Family Course Manual. Surely you know these spiritual disciplines:

- Spend time studying and meditating on his Word. He has many promises for you, but he also has things that he's going to ask of you. "Every meaningful relationship we have involves listening to what the other person is saying. If we say that we have a close relationship with a person, but we never listen to them, we aren't as close as we think." (Heath, 2021).
- Spend time praying (Matthew 6:9-13). In prayer, we spend time listening to his voice. We must remember that all communication is two-way. Relationships involve both listening and talking. We listen to our friends and talk to them. It's the same with Jesus. (Heath, 2021).
- Take time to fast. Fasting is voluntarily refraining from eating in order to obtain some spiritual purpose. David Mathis (2022) points out that Jesus assumes that his followers will fast, and even promises that it will happen. He says, "when they fast" (Mt 6:16). He doesn't say that his followers could fast, but that they "will fast" (Mt 9:15).
- Reflect your love for Him and others by setting aside time to serve others. Matthew 25:40

As a **third step**, Jesus calls us to abide in Him. This idea of abiding reflects what he said in John 15:7: If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and thus be my disciples. As we can see, one way to remain in Him is to live a life of obedience.

If you currently have a relationship with God, how is your relationship with Him? Take into account that, as in other relationships that we humans have, we can have times when not everything goes in an excellent way. When that happens, stop and think about what you're failing to do. Without a doubt, God is still there, lovingly waiting and willing to continue applying grace to our lives. So, it behooves us to work on continually improving our relationship with God.

In this relationship with Jesus, we must keep in mind what Heath Lambert states:

You cannot come to Jesus without the power that He Himself gives you. When he calls you into a relationship with him, he knows he is calling you to do something you cannot do on your own. Therefore, he gives you his forgiving and transforming grace. If your heart is far from Christ, ask him for forgiveness. Ask him to give you his power to change. Ask him to fill you with a consuming desire to know and love him more than anything and anyone. The Christ who calls you to cultivate a relationship with Him is pleased to see your dependence and will grant what you ask in faith.

In this relationship with God, one of our main requests is that He transform us through his grace until we're sanctified.

1.3 Conclusions

We've learned that God designed us in such a way that we live relationally with God, with ourselves and with others. But I can't move on to having healthy relationships with myself and others if my relationship with God isn't right.

If we already have Christ as our personal Savior, we have agreed to have a relationship with Him. But now, what's appropriate is to nurture that relationship day by day. He has promised to be with us every day (Mt 28:20), and it's up to each of us to evaluate how that relationship currently is.

If we have a healthy relationship with God, we'll be able to build healthy relationships with our spouse, our family, and everyone around us. In addition, we can be salt and light to the nations.

It's very important that, although our relationship with God is personal, our spouse helps us identify how that relationship is going. In addition, it's extremely important to help each other in the actions to be undertaken to strengthen that relationship.

My commitment to God

Reflection exercises and practical application.

1. Evaluate where your current relationship with God is. Ask your spouse to help you devise an action plan to strengthen that relationship.

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Lesson 2.

The relationship with myself

Biblical Text: 1 Peter 4:8

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.

Objectives:

- **Analyze** if there are hurts in your past that affect you and the relationships you have.
- **Recognize** the importance of maintaining a healthy spiritual life.
- **Assess** if your spiritual life is stagnating, and find practical ways out of the problem.
- **Commit** to continue growing spiritually.

2.1 Introduction

In order for us to have meaningful relationships in a healthy way, we have said that we must start from having a good relationship with God. But next, we must make sure that we have a good relationship with ourselves.

To help a person feel safe and comfortable with us, the first thing is for us to be at ease with ourselves. Therefore, in this lesson we're going to review how we feel about ourselves. Are there things from the past that continue to affect me and damage my relationships? How is my level of love for others? At what level is my "spiritual reserve"?

2.2 Development

2.2.1 Reviewing our emotions

Our emotions are a good source of information to know how we feel about ourselves and thus how to best respond to our other needs. We must reflect on if there are old wounds that embitter our lives, that make us see relationships with others in a distorted way. We must see if negative experiences from the past are preventing us from building healthy relationships.

It would be necessary to see how much we need a "detox" (a detoxification) of harmful emotions and feelings that have taken root in our lives. Remember that all of this affects our spiritual life, and therefore our relationships. The good news is that with effort and help from the Holy Spirit, we can be transformed. A tip in this regard: if you need, don't hesitate to ask your pastor or a brother or sister who can support you in this healing process.

Contrary to the common belief that it's selfish to take care of ourselves, doing so is like a gift to others, because the better we feel about ourselves, the more capable we are of taking care of others.

To achieve optimal care of ourselves we must receive care from others, take care of ourselves, and give others the best of us. Matthew 7: 12a: "Therefore whatever you want men to do to you, do so also to them."

We must see each other in the right measure:

- We should not think higher of ourselves than we ought to.
- But neither should we have a damaged and minimized self-esteem, very distant from what God has done in each one of us since he designed us.

We recommend reading Lesson 4 of Marriage Lessons 2021. On that occasion, we saw the characteristics of people with healthy self-esteem and how we can help each one in the family develop their own self-esteem.

2.2.2 The Importance of the Spiritual Life

It's of the utmost importance to examine ourselves in how we're responding to God's grace. My relationship with God, with myself and therefore with others, will depend on it. Salvador Gómez Dickson (2014), citing Octavius Winslow, mentions that:

Hostile conduct toward other Christians is symptomatic of a state of poor grace in the soul. The more occupied the heart is with the love of Christ, the less room there is for hostility toward his saints. There is so little love towards the followers of Jesus because so little is professed to oneself. As the mind becomes spiritual, it begins to rise above party names and distinctions; He renounces his narrow and limited ideas, strips himself of his prejudices towards other sectors of the Church, and embraces with Christian affection all "those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an unalterable love."

"We were born in fire, and we cannot live in smoke." J.B. Chapman.

A. What is spiritual cooling

The Bible teaches us that there are many causes for love to grow cold. A frivolous person, according to the dictionary, is someone who is insubstantial, superficial, vain, inconstant, changeable, etc., which shows one's spiritual reality. This spiritual weakness is called by Jesus himself in Revelation 2:4 as losing one's first love.

Alberto Espinoza (2020) mentions that cooling can also be applied to relationships, and even to spiritual life, in this sense: *"spiritual cooling is the process of weakening and diminishing the relationship with God that causes people to distance themselves from the Lord, which doesn't appear immediately, but occurs gradually, so much so that the person may not realize that he is suffering from it."*

B. Symptoms of spiritual cooling

In our physical health, we usually go to the doctor when we have some health problems, or sometimes, preventively to see to our state of health. The same thing happens in the spiritual life. If we want to know how we're doing, we can do a "general check-up."

For example, Alberto Espinoza (2020) and Michelen Sugel (2020) and the International Missionary Society identify various symptoms of spiritual cooling. Let's analyze some:

- **The Family and Friends Thermometer.** Without a doubt, we show ourselves as we are when we feel confident. There, the person who has grown spiritually cold is uninhibited and behaves just as he is, without pretending or pretending to be the "perfect servant."

Therefore, it's essential that you ask your family and close friends about those strong and weak areas that they observe in your life.

- **Laziness and reluctance for spiritual disciplines.** When these become an annoying thing to do, it's a sign that something is captivating you more than investing your time in knowing God. It's a warning sign if you notice that:
 - You've stopped praying frequently.
 - You lose interest in reading the Word of God and stop. Or you do read it, but you feel that God isn't speaking to you through that reading.
 - You no longer spend time meditating on the Word or having a quiet time
 - You stop congregating with others or lose the desire to do so.
- **Loss of spiritual values.** When we came to Christ, we left behind everything that seemed valuable to us in the world: "But whatever things were gain to me, I counted as loss for Christ's sake. And indeed, I even count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost everything and count it as rubbish, that I might gain Christ" (Phil. 3:7-8). But as we cool down, those values cease to be our priority.
- **Tiredness in serving.** Another sign of cooling is that you start to feel bored in ministry and constantly criticize. This affects your relationships with others and damages your service.
- **Lack of love for people:** If you feel less love for the people you are ministering to and get easily frustrated with others, it may be a symptom of cooling off. God has given you his love to minister to others, but if that love isn't flowing, maybe something is getting in the way.
- **Friendship with the world.** There is cooling if we have set aside the great commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment". A hardening of the heart towards the things of God is generated in the person. (1 Timothy 4:10)
- **Tolerance of sin and intolerance of rebuke.** We return to abandoned practices, such as lies, anger, etc.

This list isn't exhaustive. Could you list at least three additional symptoms of spiritual cooling?

C. Causes of Spiritual Cooling

Once the doctor makes the diagnosis, he determines what the problem we have is and what could have caused it. Similarly, we'll proceed in the spiritual area.

As Michelen Sugel (2020) mentions, the Bible commands us to examine ourselves, to be sure that we're truly believers, and to know the state of our soul before God. (2 Cor. 13:5) Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves. Do you recognize that Jesus Christ is in you, or don't you pass the test?

This is something we must do at least every time we partake of the Lord's Supper. Although as Michelen Sugel (2020) indicates, it should not be the only times we should do a spiritual medical check-up. (1 Cor. 11:28) Therefore let each one examine himself, and then eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

Among the possible causes of spiritual cooling may be (Quiñones, 2018):

- Carelessness and negligence in private prayer.
- Failure to exercise the spiritual disciplines. Spiritual life requires spiritual work. Seek God, study his word, pray, meditate on the Bible, come to church, etc.
- Be filled with pride for what God does in our lives, as happened to King Hezekiah. (2 Kings 20)
- Disobedience of God's commandments.
- Not being active in a ministry by putting our gifts into practice.
- Being exhausted after great tests, as happened to Elijah after defeating the prophets of Baal.
- Being tolerant of sin, trying to live without the rules of the Kingdom. This is reflected in not wanting to stop enjoying the pleasures that the world offers.
- Having an idol that we don't want to let go of. It can be the love of money or work, etc.

D. Consequences of Spiritual Cooling

Since we're analyzing the relationship with oneself, let's see how spiritual cooling will affect us:

- A lack of motivation will appear in us. We'll no longer have the courage to do the things that we've done before.
- We'll fall into a spiritual stagnation and material things will begin to take our attention.
- Selfishness that will lead us to a loss of love for others.
- We stop giving God what he deserves from our life; we no longer give him the first and best, but rather what is left over (Malachi 1:8), because our "first love" of the Father has been lost. (Revelation 2:4)
- Hardening of the heart.

E. How to get out of spiritual cooling

Restoration is possible through repentance. God can restore us and heal us from any sin (Isaiah 1:18). Even years of cooling can be erased in a moment and the Lord will give you the joy of salvation again. But, you must confess your sin and ask the Lord for forgiveness; He will forgive you, restore you, and heal you.

Roberto Quiñones (2018) points out that to get out of spiritual cooling:

- The first thing we must do is recognize that we ourselves are the cause of that coldness.
- Seek to guard our soul with fear and trembling.
 - By submitting every imagination, thought, feeling and desire to the analysis, judgment and guidance of the Holy Scriptures.
 - To take care of our heart, we must prevent corruption from residing in it.
 - To take care of our heart, we must earnestly pray to God for purification and perfection.
- Let's find a mentor or someone to whom we're accountable for our spiritual life.

2.2.3 The Grace of God and Relationships

Surely, we must wear God's glasses if we want to have a healthy view of our relationships. When we see our relationships with the precise lens, God's lens, we get to see others and ourselves as God sees them and sees us. This lens is the foundation for healthy relationships.

We need the Grace of God to relate healthily with our environment. The Bible says that Jesus grew in wisdom, stature and grace, before God and men. It also mentions that some men found grace before kings or other men. So looking through the lens of grace can be a good way to improve our relationships, because:

- It helps us restore our relationship with God, with oneself, with those in the family, with others.
- It helps us recover our true identity and discover our true vocation. The point of greatest transforming weight is changed people (Myers, 2005:122).
- It will remind us that the other person is also made by God for a purpose. We'll remember that others are also God's creation in his likeness. The first step is to help people discover that their human dignity and identity are intrinsically related to God.
- It will lead us away from legalism. Grace helps us to be less legalistic because God does this to us. I cannot want the other to comply with rules that I myself don't comply with and that sometimes not even God requires of him. Like, for example, asking the other person to be perfect if I'm not. It's about giving the other the freedom to be as he is and not as I am or as I want him to be. It will help us judge people less.
- It will make us overcome any pride. Grace helps us to see the other with eyes of humility, without feeling better or superior to others.
- We overcome our fears. Grace helps us to relate without masks, and allow people to know our strengths and weaknesses, without underestimating one or the other. It helps us to live without fear of rejection, and to welcome whoever, not just who we like. Grace helps us to be more ourselves.
- Let's grant forgiveness. Only by grace are we able to forgive the unforgivable, to trust again. Grace helps us not count the offenses of others. By grace we can go from disappointments, betrayals, and deceptions, to having healthy relationships that lead us to live fully. By grace we can recognize our mistakes and ask for forgiveness. Grace helps us to be merciful to ourselves and others as Jesus is with us.

2.3 Conclusions

The point of greatest transforming weight is changed people (Myers, 2005:122). The first step is to help people discover that their human dignity and identity are intrinsically related to God. To do this, they must begin a relationship with God, or restore it if they had one previously.

Then, character must be developed by instilling and forming in people the values that give them a better vision of the future and allow them to love others as themselves. We aren't alone in this; Jesus left us with his Holy Spirit, who is the one who transforms us into the likeness of Christ.

Finally, the person must be empowered to live values in favor of his new vision. We must remember that the journey of grace also consists of accompanying others through life as they are being transformed by the Holy Spirit. Yes, we are our brother's keepers, and we must mutually encourage each other on the daily journey. For this, we need to build healthy relationships.

My commitment to God

Reflection exercises and practical application.

1. How can you improve your relationship with yourself? Can you identify “old wounds” that prevent you from healthy relationships with others? What is the process to heal?

2. How has grace helped you fight pride in your relationships? How much do you need to keep working on this? How can you do that?

3. How does a person's spiritual state affect their relationships?

4. What is your current spiritual state? How can you improve it, and consequently improve your relationships? _____

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Lesson 3. *Relationships* Jesus style. Part I

Biblical Text: John 15:4-5

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” *John 15:12.*

Objectives:

- **Analyze and apply** the characteristics identified in the Jesus Model to better build healthy relationships with others.
- **Determine strategies** for improvement in areas we need to improve to build healthy relationships.

3.1 Introduction

God saw to it that we got to know him in more detail. To do this, he became incarnate through his Son Christ Jesus. With this, God wanted to show Himself to people who couldn't see him, sending someone whom they could see (Valerga, 2020:18).

Sergio Valerga (2020: 18) points out that “People cannot see God. They can't see Jesus, and they can't see the Holy Spirit. But they can see the people who follow Jesus and live for Him.”

Therefore, to understand how interpersonal relationships should be, it's necessary to study the main characteristics of the model Jesus used in his daily relationships. We hope that by knowing them, we can ask God to help us develop each of these characteristics that we're going to study below.

3.2 Development

3.2.1 He was moved by love for his neighbor and for the Father

We've already pointed out that the starting point in relationships is having a relationship with God. Similarly, to have healthy personal relationships, a personal relationship with Christ is required (John 15:4,5). So, an excellent way to get to know him and relate to Jesus is to study the model He left us on how to relate to others. Let's not forget that the purpose of discipleship in grace is that with the help of the Holy Spirit, we're transformed into the image of Christ.

We can affirm that love is the very essence of the Gospel, and Jesus Christ is our example. He was moved by love for his neighbor, to the point of giving his life for them (John 3:16). So, he left us the commandment to “... love one another, as I have loved you” (John 15:12). Aleteia (2014) points out that the practice of love that makes the other my neighbor is the condition for finding the love of God (Mt 22,35-40).

We must ask ourselves what love is like for my family, my brothers and sisters in the faith, and those who aren't yet Christians. Is my love growing each day to resemble the way Jesus loved me and gave his life for me? Do my relationships with my siblings, children, or spouse help them find meaning in their lives?

3.2.2 Forgiveness that heals relationships.

In any relationship, we're always going to make mistakes. That carries the risk of hurting and being hurt in our relationships. I think that at least most of us will agree that that which people we're close to, such as family or friends, do or say hurts us more than what other people say or do, and that affects us personally.

For this reason, our Lord Jesus repeatedly took care to teach us the importance of forgiveness. But his teaching wasn't only in words. Jesus took care, in every important area of his life, to leave us a model to follow. Thus, we see how He forgave even those who attacked him, thus showing love in action (Luke 23:24), even laying down his life as an atonement for our sins. He was always willing:

- to forgive the crowd that was there at the foot of the cross shouting "Crucify him, crucify him!"
- to forgive the guards who have beaten and humiliated him.
- to forgive his people, who don't recognize him as the long-awaited Messiah.
- to forgive his disciples, who left him alone in such great anguish.

In the model of prayer that he left us, Jesus took care to show us the importance of asking God for forgiveness, first of all, but also of forgiving those who offend us. Therefore, it's of the utmost importance that we learn to forgive.

Let's see how the lack of forgiveness affects us then in our relationships:

- Jesus helps us see that if we don't forgive those who offend us, then we won't be forgiven by the Father. We've said that every relationship begins with the relationship we have with God. Thus, our relationship with God is affected by our lack of forgiveness towards those who offend us.
- The relationship with oneself is seriously affected because we'll live with negative emotions and feelings. Our relationship with ourselves also deteriorates due to the lack of forgiveness of others. We start to feel bad about ourselves. We can even get to the point where it affects our mental and emotional health. Remember that we have said that it's of great importance to take care of ourselves.
- The unfortunate thing is that this deterioration of my relationship with God and with myself due to the lack of forgiveness will result in terrible relationships with those around me. Have you had to live with people who begin to hold a grudge in their hearts because of the lack of forgiveness? Have you felt comfortable relating to those people? Would you be able to open your heart and tell them what you're experiencing in a situation that you're going through? I also think they would have a hard time relating to you if you were in that condition.

If we don't work on forgiveness in our lives, it will be very difficult for us to aspire to have healthy relationships with others. On one occasion, Peter asked Jesus: "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Up to 7 times?" Peter was trying to be magnanimous by forgiving whoever had offended him. But Jesus' answer to Peter and to us was "up to seventy times seven!" (Matthew 18:22). It's logical to think that it isn't about keeping track of the occasions that we have forgiven someone. On the contrary, Jesus was saying that we should forgive as many times as necessary.

Without a doubt, on many occasions this won't be easy. But again, the lens of grace will help us remember the many times that God has forgiven us, only because of his love and his mercy. That should encourage us to recognize the times that we ourselves have been wrong and have hurt other people. Therefore, we must also understand that others are wrong just like us.

Keep in mind, then, the various teachings that Jesus left us about forgiveness. Some that we can mention are:

- In the parable of the two debtors, Jesus teaches us that the debt that He forgave us doesn't compare with the debt or offense that others can owe us. Even so, He granted us forgiveness, only by his grace. (Matthew 18:25-35)
- In the model prayer of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus helps us see that if we don't forgive those who offend us, God will not forgive our offenses. (Matthew 6:9-15)
- We must forgive as many times as necessary. (Matthew 18:21,22)
- In Matthew 18:15-19, Jesus teaches us how to solve a problem with a fellow Christian, including forgiveness. He helps us see that sometimes we can use witnesses to clarify the conflict.
- In Luke 7:36–50, Jesus teaches us that love must be very great in proportion to the gift of forgiveness that has been granted to us.

Cecil Samuelson (s.f.) points out that:

Forgiving others doesn't mean that we necessarily support or condone the misbehavior or transgression. In fact, there are many acts and attitudes that deserve a clear condemnation; but still, we must fully forgive the offender.

Now reflect on how you're going to apply forgiveness to improve your relationships, starting at home, then at church, and then with others.

3.2.3 Look out for the needs of others.

The Lord Jesus made clear to us his interest in showing love to others. Clear evidence of this can be in meeting the needs of others, since it's within our reach. Let's see some examples of this in the life of Jesus:

- He was concerned about people's well-being, including their health.
- He understood people's emotions and sought to heal them (Samaritan woman, widow who lost her child, mother of a girl with spiritual problems, etc.)
- He loves those who fail, always giving opportunities to those who make mistakes. (Luke 15:11-32)
- He focuses on the needs of others, even before his own. (Matthew 19:36)
- Jesus showed concern for the poor.
- He sought out the most segregated in society, including lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors, etc.

Later, the church also adopted this pattern of meeting the needs of those around them:

- They sold their property to support the needs of others. (Acts 4:32-37)
- They fed the Christian community that gathered for teaching. (Act 6)

- Gave large-scale aid to communities facing famine. (Acts 11:27-30; 12:17) On many occasions, there were churches like the one in Macedonia that, even in the midst of persecution and scarcity, gave with great generosity. (2 Cor. 8:1-7)
- They healed through miracles. (Acts 3:1-10; 5:15; 28:8)
- They delivered from spirit possession. (Acts 8:4-13)
- They cared for prisoners. (Hebrews 13:3)
- They were distinguished by their hospitality (Rom.12:13)
- They promoted better conditions for slaves. (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:4)
- They promoted respect for leaders. (1 Tim. 2;1,2; Rom. 13:1-7)
- Showed perfect love to others through relational holiness. (Gal. 6:10)

He asks us to do the same. In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus tells us:

- I was hungry, and you gave me food;
- I was thirsty, and you gave me drink;
- I was a stranger, and you took me in;
- I was naked, and you covered me;
- I was sick, and you visited me;
- I was in prison, and you came to me.

John Maxwell tells us: “People don't care how much you know if they don't know how much you care about them. You can cultivate credibility when you relate to people and show them that you genuinely want to help them” (Maxwell, 2004:47). So, as you show love in action towards others and meeting their needs, then relationships with them will tend to develop harmoniously. Keep in mind here that we're holistic beings and our needs are of different types:

- There are physiological needs, which have to do with food, sleep, etc.
- Some needs are emotional or affective. So we must be as expressive as possible in terms of showing love to them.
- There are needs of recognition and fulfillment. So we must seek to encourage them at all times. We must support them in their life projects and help them achieve their dreams of studying a profession.
- There are spiritual needs. We must have a spiritual formation plan for the family.

3.2.4 It goes to the bottom of the problem.

Sometimes when a problem arises within the family, we tend to "turn the matter over" or "let it solve itself.". However, Jesus always sought to show people the main problem they had. We can see some examples of this:

- **Jesus and the rich young ruler.** Jesus wasn't impressed by the socioeconomic status of that young man, nor because of the way he sought him out and prostrated himself before him. It was true, the young man was striving to keep the commandments, and was possibly of good moral character. But Jesus had to confront him so that he could really have a part in the Kingdom of God. Jesus made the young man, whom he loved, see that his main problem was the love of money. (Mark 10: 37-40)

- **Jesus and the Samaritan woman.** Jesus helped the woman see that the thirst she felt wasn't going to be filled with the love of men or with religiosity. Only her relationship with God was going to cause her thirst to be quenched. In an extraordinary way, when she began a relationship with God, her relationship with herself changed radically and for the first time, she felt whole.

Not only that happened, but now she was able to relate to all those around her. She used to shy away from being with others, which is inferred from the inappropriate time that she would go to draw water from the well, when the sun was high. Now she was no longer afraid to talk to others, and even more, she went to the people of the town and told them about her wonderful encounter with Jesus. We can imagine her transformation, to the degree that those who despised her were attracted to meet the one who was the cause of such a great transformation: Jesus. (John 4:4-26).

You realize that by establishing a right relationship with Jesus, she set off a chain of healing. She felt good about herself. This led her to speak publicly (connect with others) with those who wanted to listen to her about her transforming encounter with Christ. As a consequence, others came to know Christ, so Jesus had to prolong his stay in that place. Yes, the people of Samaria began to be transformed because of a previously despised woman who was willing to listen to Jesus and have a personal relationship with Him.

3.3 Conclusions

We've studied that our relationship with others should be a reflection of God's love in our hearts. Since the purpose of the Christian is to grow in the image of Christ, we have begun to study some characteristics that distinguish the relationships that Jesus had with others during his earthly ministry.

Without a doubt, love is the basis of all healthy relationships. This must be shown in thought, words and actions to our spouse, family and for all those around us. However, we aren't exempt from making mistakes. Therefore, Jesus showed us the importance of forgiving those who offend or hurt us. This includes our willingness to own up to our mistakes and ask forgiveness as well.

An excellent way to show love is to see how to meet the needs of others. We must be aware that we're holistic beings and that these needs aren't only physiological, but also affective, recognition, security, etc.

My commitment to God

Reflection exercises and practical application.

1. List the ways you show your love to your spouse and family. How could you improve it? It's good if you consult with them, to get their opinion.

2. Are there areas in your life where you still don't forgive offenses? Make a plan before God so that He will help you forgive and be healed.

3. How are you meeting the emotional needs of your spouse and family?

Bibliographic references

Lesson 4.

Relationships Jesus Style. Part II

Biblical Text: Matthew 7:12

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Objectives:

- **Analyze and apply** the characteristics identified in the Jesus Model to better build healthy relationships with others.
- **Determine strategies** for improvement in areas we need to improve on to build healthy relationships.

4.1 Introduction

We've been studying since the previous lesson how important it is to build healthy relationships with everyone, starting with our spouse, family, and those closest to us.

For this we have been analyzing the distinctive characteristics of the relationships that Jesus built. We've already seen how important love is, being willing to forgive those who offend us, and attending to the needs of others. Now we're going to study other additional characteristics of the Jesus Model, such as giving the value to women and children that they have before God, loving those who fail, and applying the Golden Rule in our relationships.

4.2 Development

4.2.1 Jesus appreciated women

He revalued women who, in the Jewish context, had little or no value. Let's look at some examples of this and draw some lessons to improve our relationships.

First example. Jesus and the adulterous woman. (John 8:1-11).

The religious leaders of his day confronted Jesus with a woman who had "been caught in the very act of adultery" (John 8:4). He notes that the woman was never given a chance to defend herself; she was put on public display. By the way, nothing was ever said about the man she committed adultery with. That was the culture of those times, which doesn't differ much from today.

So the religious leaders wanted to put Jesus to the test. "Well, what do you say?" Jesus just limited himself to writing with his finger in the sand. Then at their insistence, he declared, "Whoever of you is without sin, he is the first to throw a stone at her." It was a devastating blow, straight to the heart and mind of those who accused her. It was reflected that their relationship with God and with themselves were seriously impaired or broken. The men then dropped their stones and left, forgetting to punish that woman. After they had left, leaving only Jesus and her, He said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"None, sir," she replied. Then Jesus said to her, "I don't condemn you either. Leave, and from now on, sin no more."

Here Jesus has given us a master lesson on relationships with others: Respect, stand up to dialogue, look into the eyes, listen, ask, give yourself time to respond, don't label those who have failed. At the same time, he makes us aware that our human nature is weak, imperfect, erratic. But what if we accept ourselves? He is willing to have a relationship with us. He has also pointed out the need for those accusers to review their relationship with God.

That woman's relationship with God was transformed in an instant. That surely must have brought her peace with herself. She, who was about to die because of her sin, received such great forgiveness. Although the Bible doesn't narrate more about it, she surely returned, thinking about the words of Jesus: "Neither do I condemn you. Go away and sin no more." Is there any way that wouldn't greatly affect her relationships with others?

If an offense of this degree occurs within the family, such as that of the woman who committed adultery, how should we act? We must ask ourselves if our attitude isn't like that of those religious leaders. We must think of how many times we have responded in situations like this, or even less serious, with "word stones" or other violent forms. Will we take the time to respond? Shall we say "go ahead and sin no more"?

Second example. Jesus and the woman sick with an issue of blood. (Mark 5:25-34). I invite you to imagine the state of that woman who for twelve years had suffered from this tremendous disease. She had spent all her savings looking to find relief from her illness, but instead, things got worse. We must remember that this state of hers caused her to be perceived as unclean. Besides, she could hardly have a life as a wife with that situation. But her faith led her to crawl through the crowd, which she should not approach because of her condition, and try to at least touch Jesus' cloak. Carlos Ordoñez (2021) tells us that:

As for the state of health of her body, a continuous hemorrhage would undoubtedly lead to great weakness and surely to acute anemia; we would see her pale face and a low mood in the face of a great problem without a solution.

Carlos Ordoñez himself (2021) mentions that she surely lived in anguish in silence since the law made her impure, and therefore, she was excluded from most of the relationships in Jewish society (Leviticus 15:25-27).

She surely was rejected and singled out because her condition made many think that she was under God's judgment for her sin. She was surely divorced because the law allowed her husband to leave her. Her heart was under a very high level of stress and pain.

All of her relationships were impaired, he notes, identifying:

- Your marital relationship with her husband. She couldn't be with her husband, if she had one.
- His maternal relationship with her children. She couldn't be with her children, if she had them.

- The relationship in her home. It was to be segregated from everyone else, to have her own things, a spoon, a plate, a bed for her, a chair, etc.
- Her relationships with those of the faith. She was prevented from going to the temple.
- Her social relationships were nonexistent. She couldn't get close to other people.

But that woman had surely heard of Jesus, and she believed that He could do something for her. Her situation was difficult, but no longer hopeless.

- Yes, she was an impure woman to the Jews,
- She no longer had any money,
- She was fatigued and weak from her anemia,
- To finish complicating things, she met a large crowd that she had to overcome to reach Jesus (Ordoñez, 2021).

The point is that despite the obstacles in her way, she slipped through that crowd and achieved her goal of touching the edge of Jesus' cloak. Instantly she was healed, the miracle had happened, and finally her sickness ceased. Was that enough? No, because Jesus had much more blessing for her. He stopped and asked who touched him? She knew that healing power had flowed from Him. Jesus' question about who had touched him sought a public declaration of faith. That woman steeled herself and responded to Jesus, declares the Bible.

Then the woman, fearing and trembling, knowing what had been done to her, came and fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. (Mk 5:33)

That dialogue with Jesus restored her relationship with Him. It restored her dignity, and despite the fact that the Law didn't allow him to be near her, Jesus built a bridge to reestablish the relationship.

We learn several lessons from this biblical account.

- The woman made the best decision to go meet Jesus, despite all that it cost her. She defied the traditions that didn't allow her to be with other people, because she was declared unclean, in order to reach Jesus, moved by her great faith.
- Her relationship with Jesus was marked in that transforming encounter.
- Now her relationship with herself was in the process of being restored. She was no longer the unclean woman; she was no longer prey to that terrible disease.
- Her transformation resulted in great changes in her relationships with others. She was now able to be with them and have healthy relationships. Now she could aspire to have a life in marriage as she surely dreamed of for a long time.

Third example. Jesus and the women who accompanied him.

Jesus not only restored equal value to women in terms of being created by God in his likeness, he approached them, allowing them to serve him in different ways. Some surely attending to his needs, others provided resources for the ministry. (Luke 8:1-3)

Jesús de la Torre (2014:4) comments that:

Jesus appears close to many women. They accompanied him like no other prophet at that time; they left the private area and dared to approach Jesus and he welcomed them. They followed him, they accompanied him, and he accompanied them.

4.2.3 He gave a special place to children

We must remember that Jesus became incarnate, divesting himself of his deity, and became like us. In addition to having designed us, He Himself experienced the various life stages as a human being. He was a child at one time and knows exactly what they need.

Let's take a look at the Jewish customs of the time. In the times of the Lord Jesus, children had no value:

- Children at that time were “tolerated” for the simple hope that they would grow up.
- Children were not counted as people. Usually, only men were counted.
- Their presence wasn't significant in the synagogues nor elsewhere.
- Conversing with a child was like wasting time. That is why we see the apostles separating the children from their Master.

However, Jesus gave a special place to children, which in that context they didn't have. The gospels show us Jesus giving special attention to children in particular. Let's remember some examples (Antonio Rivero, s.f.):

- Jesus healed the daughter of a Canaanite woman. (Matthew 15: 21-28) Jesus freed a girl from the spirits that oppressed her.
- Jesus asked that children be given an opportunity to come to Him (Matthew 19:13-15). Jesus hugged the children and blessed them by laying his hands on them.
- Jesus valued children: he said that from the mouths of children come praise that pleases God (Mt 21: 16). He held them up as models of purity and innocence.
- Jesus expressed to them his special affection. Only twice in the Gospels do we see the word “caresses” applied to Jesus. And both times his caresses were directed at children (Mk 9: 36-37; Mt 18: 1-5).
- Jesus cared about them: he rebuked those who looked at them with contempt (Mt 18: 10); he pointed out, above all, the harshest punishments for those who hurt a child (Mt 18: 6).
- Jesus resurrected the daughter of Jairus. He approached some parents who had lost their son, who had died. (Mark 5:35-43)

We must bear in mind that childhood is a formative stage of great importance for one's life. We must avoid falling into the Jewish customs of the time of Jesus in which children weren't important in family and social relationships. As Christian families, we must pay special attention to the healthy upbringing of our children, developing meaningful relationships that include them.

4.2.4 He loved the son who failed.

Jesus took it upon himself to show us the Father's heart. That included the excellent teaching on the prodigal son. (Luke 15:11-32). From this passage we can see that the son failed and offended his father in every possible way:

- He asked for his inheritance when the father was still alive.
- He wasn't interested in helping the father and family with their work.
- He didn't want them to have any opinion about how he should run his life and walked away.
- He squandered the product of his father's life's work.
- He broke up his relationship with his father.
- He caused family problems, especially with his brother.

On the other hand, it's highlighted:

- The great love of the father who longed for the return of his son.
- He gave mercy to his son, not giving him the punishment that he deserved.
- He showered grace on him and forgave him for all offenses, even though he didn't deserve it.
- He restored his rights as his son, even though he didn't deserve it.
- The father hugged and kissed him
- The father celebrated the return of his son.
- He dialogued with his other son, who was outraged by the father's merciful treatment of his brother. That other son also received an invitation.

As families, we must strive to raise healthy children. However, we aren't exempt from them making mistakes of different kinds. We must never let their mistakes deteriorate our relationship with them. On the contrary, that's when they need us the most.

4.2.5 He left us the golden rule

He taught us the golden rule, which must prevail in all human relationships (Matthew 7:12). Aletheia (2014) points out that this places a challenge before us: wanting the good of the other and working on the construction of common spaces where we can all live together.

Interacting with others demands respect. In the times of Jesus, people only approached those who respected and accepted them; that's why they came to Jesus.

That golden rule must be applied to everyone. No one should be excluded or belittled. Hernando Uribe (2011:5) points out that the importance of relationships is unlimited. Relationship places us in the similarity, the non-indifference, the interest in the other. Relationship turns distance into closeness, makes the whole world a home.

The golden rule also includes serving others instead of wanting them to serve us. On a certain occasion, the disciples asked Jesus that when he became king, would he take them into account for the best positions in his government. This generated discontent among the other disciples. Jesus took advantage of the occasion to help them see that we must serve others with love.

4.3 Conclusions

In this lesson, we have advanced with other distinguishing characteristics of the Jesus Model of relationships. The list has not been exhaustive, so further study of these relationships is recommended. The next time you read the Bible, you can use the lens of relationships and continue to draw new lessons from Jesus' treatment of others.

We've studied about the little value that was given to women and children in the Jewish culture. We've been challenged to revalue what the current culture has taught us where the macho culture places little value on women. We've also reflected on the treatment we're giving to children. Too often they've been left at the mercy of what they learn from television, the internet and other sources. The pace of life and sometimes indifference can lead us to be absent in the healthy upbringing of our children.

We've also learned to forgive those who fail, especially children. The Golden Rule leads us to develop more empathy for each person, starting with those at home.

My commitment to God

Reflection exercises and practical application.

1. Evaluate how much you are applying each characteristic analyzed here. In which ones do you have a deficit? What actions can you implement in each of them to improve?

2. How would you describe the value placed on women in your home and in the church?
How can relationships with them be improved?

3. How would you describe the value placed on children in your home and at church? How can you improve relationships with them in your home?

4. What aspects of today's culture are an obstacle to healthy relationships? What can be done to overcome them?

5. How can love and forgiveness improve our relationships? How can these “characteristics” best be developed?

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Lesson 5.

Attitudes and Interpersonal relationships

Bible Text: *Philippians 2:5*

“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.”

Objectives:

- **Recognize** the importance of having the correct attitudes in our life.
- **Identify** the attitudes that we currently have.
- **Work** to improve our attitudes so that we can have the same attitudes that Jesus had.

5.1 Introduction

The best way to start sharing these reflections on “Jesus’ attitudes” is that we think about who we all are. For example, I am Patty's husband and father of two beautiful daughters (Gely and Patty). On the other hand, I'm brother to Silvia, Armando and Esperanza. I have lots of nieces and nephews and a lot of grandchildren. I am part of a local church. I have a group of friends and I am a collaborator in different ministries where I interact with others. Do you see that we're designed to interact with many people? And even more, we're able to be salt and light to the world.

In this context, I want to explain that our attitudes and ideas are the lens through which we see our lives. They influence what we think and what we do. Without realizing it, they operate as filters in our thoughts and emotions and lead us to act in certain ways. Therefore, improving our attitudes can help us with the important things in life, improving our relationships with others.

We start off from the fact that the Bible asks us to have the same attitude that Christ always had. Therefore, in this lesson we're going to study what an attitude is? How are our attitudes formed? Why is it so important to have a good attitude? What were the attitudes that Jesus modeled for us, and which ones did He ask us to avoid? How can I improve my attitude?

5.2 Development

5.2.1 What are attitudes?

When looking for the meaning of what an attitude is, we find that there are different ways of looking at it. For example, in psychology:

*An attitude is habitual behavior that occurs in different circumstances.
Attitudes determine each individual's moods. Attitudes are patented by a person's repeated reactions.*

In the field of education:

An attitude is an underlying disposition that, with other influences, contributes to determine a variety of behaviors in relation to an object or class of objects, and that includes the affirmation of convictions and feelings about it and about actions of attraction or rejection.

In sociology:

An attitude consists of a system of values and beliefs, with a certain stability over time, of an individual or group that is predisposed to feel and react in a certain way to certain stimuli.

An attitude, then, is the manifestation or the spirit with which we face certain situations; it can be positive or negative.

- **Positive attitudes** allow individuals to focus solely on the benefits of the situation in which he or she is going through, and to face reality in a healthy, positive and effective way.
- **Negative attitudes** don't allow individuals to take any advantage of the situation that they are experiencing, leading to feelings of frustration and unfavorable results that don't allow them to achieve their set objectives.

Attitudes are made up of three essential components:

- **Behavioral element.** It refers to the way in which emotions or thoughts are expressed. It's the way of manifesting or acting about something, motivated by the attitude.
- **Emotional element.** It refers to the feelings that each person has. What do they feel?
- **Cognitive element.** It refers to what the individual thinks.

Let's look at this illustration, to understand this better. Let's study the case of Nabal and Abigail in 1 Samuel 25

Nabal	Abigail	David
A very rich man, owner of a thousand goats and three thousand sheep	She was Nabal's wife	He had been anointed king, but had fled from Saul
Nabal was insolent and behaved badly	She was a beautiful and intelligent woman	He sent his collaborators to ask Nabal for support. Tell him: "May you and your family have health and peace, and everything that belongs to you! When your shepherds were with us, we never bothered them."
But Nabal's reply was rude: "And who is this David? Who is the son of Jesse? Why should I share my bread and water, and the meat I have reserved for my shearers, with people I don't even know where they come from?"	At that time, Abigail wasn't at home. But when she got home and was notified by a servant of what had happened, she decided to take food to David, without telling her husband.	David sends him a message saying "I will be grateful if you could receive my men well, because we must celebrate this day. Please give your servants and your son David whatever you have at hand."
We observe an attitude of arrogance	We observe a conciliatory attitude	We observe an attitude of respect and humility, because we must remember that by then he had already been anointed as king

Let's now see the components of attitudes in response to Nabal's refusal to help David's men:

Attitude component	How David reacted
What is thought (cognitive component)	David somehow already knew Nabal as someone who was impudent and misbehaved. But even so, he appealed to him to be generous and gracious at his request.
What is felt (emotional component)	Since David had been respectful of Nabal and had even given them protection, David now had an attitude of anger and indignation at the treatment. He felt that his kind actions weren't being reciprocated.
The way of responding (behavioral component)	"I was protecting that guy's properties in the desert for nothing, so he wouldn't lose anything. Now it turns out that he pays me poorly for the good I did to him. May God punish me mercilessly if before dawn I don't finish off all his men!" These were David's plans, that is, the way he was going to act. Fortunately, God used Abigail and David changed his attitude and his plans.

5.2.2 The importance of our attitudes.

There is a saying which goes like this: "*What will determine your altitude isn't your aptitude but your attitude.*" Your attitude is crucial because it determines how you act. Proverbs 23:7 says, "*He is the kind of person who is always thinking about the cost.*" Remember that attitudes lead us to action. Augusto Cury (2008: 60) points out that:

Although life is short, it's long enough for many mistakes to be made. We have individualistic, self-centered, hidden, aggressive attitudes. We judge without tolerance the people we love the most. We reject those who oppose us.

To see how important attitudes are, let's look at Luke 18:9-14. In this passage, the Lord Jesus narrates the parable of the pharisee and the publican. Please read it calmly three times. If possible, do it with different versions of the Bible. Then let's examine the attitudes of both characters and analyze the results that each one got before God.

The Pharisee	The Publican
He has a proud attitude. He stays standing before God, and it seems that he is talking to the mirror looking at himself and seeking self-approval from it, rather than seeking God's mercy. The NIV notes suggest that "The Pharisee began to pray with himself."	An attitude of humility before God. He kept far away, not even feeling worthy enough to look up.
He boasts of his alms and fasts. Jesus identifies those who "were very confident in their own righteousness and despised others"	He recognized that he was a sinner. So he pleaded for God's mercy and forgiveness. "O God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"
He believes himself superior to others, including the publican. "O God, I thank you that I am not like other men—thieves, criminals, adulterers—much less like that tax collector."	Feeling unworthy, he couldn't even compare himself to others.
He is very critical of others. He had such a high opinion of himself that he despised others.	He doesn't criticize others, but focuses on what he needs to correct about himself
The outcomes they got	
He wasn't justified by his good works	He went home justified
He was humiliated for exalting himself (James 4:6)	His attitude of repentance and humility brought him salvation. Because he was humble, he was exalted.

The contrast between the two characters in the parable is striking and provocative, above all because, in the public opinion at the time, the figure of a Pharisee was the model of virtue and instruction, while the mere name of a publican was already synonymous with being a sinner since they were branded as impure for working for the Gentiles. Jesus painted a clear picture of the arrogance of the Pharisee that no one would want to copy, in contrast to the good example of the humble publican.

5.2.3 Jesus as the model of a good attitude

As always, the Lord Jesus must be the model to which we should aspire. That's why we're going to analyze His attitude. In general, no one doubts that Jesus maintained a perfect attitude in every situation. We can highlight some examples to see how Jesus reacted to certain situations:

- ***An attitude of obedience to the Father.*** Without a doubt, His goal of always seeking to please His Father first (John 6:38) was decisive in helping the Lord Jesus always have the right attitude.
- ***He stands out for always having a loving attitude towards others.*** His greatest test was to lay down His life for others, even though they were sinners, so that they might be saved. (John 3:16)
- ***He always showed an attitude of service.*** His whole life was dedicated to serving others. A very clear example of this was when Jesus surprised the disciples by washing their feet when He was about to die on the cross at Calvary (John 13:1-20).
- ***He was patient even when He was surrounded by trials.*** He prayed for everything and didn't worry about anything. We too must seek God's guidance in every aspect of our lives and allow Him to work His perfect will (Matthew 26:39).
- ***He always helped to resolve conflicts.*** When two of the disciples created a conflict when they asked Jesus for the best positions, the other disciples were upset about it. Jesus immediately addressed the issue and took the opportunity to use it as a teaching moment: "*We do not come to serve others. On the contrary, the best disciple is the one who serves others the most*" (Mark 10:35-52).
- ***In the midst of suffering, He had hope.*** Jesus' attitude was never defensive or discouraged.
- ***Amid ridicule, abuse and hostility, He didn't threaten anyone or retaliate.*** Instead, "*He entrusted himself to him who judges justly*" (1 Peter 2:23).
- ***He always sought to include everyone,*** beginning with the most destitute: women, children, lepers, the sick, widows, etc.

5.2.4 How to improve our attitude

We can discover some of our bad attitudes. Jesus' own disciples had some that He made sure they corrected:

- They had an attitude of wanting the **best positions**. "*A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest*" (Luke 22:24).

- On one occasion, returning from preaching, they asked Jesus to let them pray for **fire to fall on those who had received them impolitely**. "When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them" (Luke 9: 54).
- They had an **exclusionary attitude** towards children. They gave them little or no value. "When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14).
- Attitude of **anxiety**. Jesus teaches us not to worry about meeting our needs, but to put the search for a genuine relationship with God first (Matthew 6:33,34).

If we discover some bad attitudes (at the end of the lesson, there's an exercise on this), we must take the necessary measures to correct them. Among the actions to be implemented may be:

- **Let's start from the love of God and our neighbor**. We must refocus on the great commandment (Matthew 22:34-40). We need to have the desire to please God in everything we do, including really loving Him and our neighbors.
- **Remember that our goal is to be like Christ**. When Paul writes that our "attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus," he summed up what Jesus' attitude was: selflessness, humility, and service.
- Remember how much we are **worth to God**. "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (Luke 12:6-7).
- Explain to your spouse what they've done or the attitude they assumed that has offended you, with the correct attitude and in a good way. Reach out to your spouse with **soft words of reconciliation**, talk together about what has offended you. There are always two parties in a conflict. Both parties must be fully listened to.
- Be mature and recognize that **we aren't always right**. Recognize your mistakes and stop blaming others.

When the prophet Nathan confronted David about his double sin of adultery and murder, David not only repented, but he gave us one of the greatest passages we have in the Bible: Psalm 51, a beautiful prayer of repentance. We wouldn't have that beautiful psalm if Nathan hadn't confronted David and if David hadn't humbly repented (Barclay, 2018).

- Focus on the **needs and interests of others**. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others" (Philippians 2:3-4).

- **Patient attitude.** Most people tend to see only negative things in the unpleasant experiences of life. We must keep in mind that all things work together for good for those who love God. Our life is in the hands of God, and everything that happens to us is allowed by Him for a purpose.
- **Remain optimistic** in the face of negativism (v.14-17). Although we interact with negative people who complain about everything and have a defeatist mentality, we must remain optimistic. We must keep in mind the goal of achieving the supreme award.
- **Attitude of contentment.** Paul teaches that "...I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances" (Phil.4:11). This is an attitude that results in happiness, rather than achievements. Be grateful for the little things of life.

5.2.5 How Attitudes are Formed

Attitudes are developed throughout life. We "learn" them and adopt them based on the experiences we live through. They can also be developed in response to a stimulus generated by external agents. But, just as we learn them, we can remove them from our lives and change them for new attitudes that really help us grow in the likeness of Christ. Paul urges us:

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:22-24).

We must keep in mind that God's purpose for His children is the transformation of our minds into the likeness of Christ. He wants us to grow spiritually to be like Christ. Christlikeness is about transforming our minds. Once again, Paul tells us:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship (Romans 12:2).

5.2.6 Attitudes that help us to have good interpersonal relationships

Eugenia Pons de Gironella (2021) highlights the following attitudes that work in favor of building healthy relationships:

1. **Seek self-knowledge.** The relationship we have with others is part of who we are, and in turn, the relationships we maintain also transcend us and constitute who we are. There lies our greatness, particularities, talents, and strength; we're made for action: *"What I am needs to be shared with you or it will be lost forever."*
2. **Sharpen how we see,** being attentive to focus on the person. Start small interactions: a greeting, a smile, a question... Show affection, *"What happens to you matters to me."*
3. **Appreciate the difference,** because it's part of God's design to put us together. Let's seek to accept and communicate gratitude, because the integration of diversity helps us in our personal development in skills and in empathy: *"You give a lot to me."*

4. **Learn to be flexible.** This is a way of being patient and aware that the other person is different, applying this wisdom to create greater understanding, favoring fluid communication and a willing attitude to seek joint solutions: ***“You are important to me.”***
5. **Know how to ask and give.** Asking strengthens relationships and talks about who you are, your story, your needs. It’s letting yourself be seen and sharing that you are vulnerable and need the other. It legitimizes asking, knowing how to give, serving the other, is a movement of approaching and closeness which says: ***“It makes me feel good to share my needs and accept yours.”***
6. **Promote communication.** Knowing how to listen and be assertive: talk to people effectively, generously and empathetically, knowing how to suggest instead of judging, express feelings, talk about your own and others' motives and needs, and ask, instead of imposing: ***“I hear you.”***
7. **Prevent conflicts,** facilitating communication and avoiding making assumptions. We must build common bridges to integrate the needs and interests of each other: ***“What can I do for you?”***
8. **Make-up without intoxicating situations,** avoiding amplifying situations involving others in order to take sides or make judgments that harm the relationship: ***“It’s important for me to take care of your feelings.”***
9. **Forgive,** avoid remaining in pain and try to eliminate it. Accept the time for forgiveness that the other needs: ***“I respect our relationship a lot and it would hurt me a lot to lose it.”***
10. **Be trustworthy,** showing mutual respect, interest in the other, in dialogue and relational reciprocity in order to know how to appreciate both achievement and criticism. We must be able to honestly expose our vulnerability, revealing and embracing mutual feelings. It’s about being loyal and telling the truth, being fair when considering the interest and value of the other: ***“How important it is to be able to count on you.”***

5.3 Conclusions

We’ve learned how valuable it is to examine our own attitude toward the situation or person and determine whether it’s positive or negative. If our attitude is negative, we must transform it into a positive one, looking at the other person from God's perspective, with His love and mercy.

We must have the attitude that Christ had. For this we have learned how to transform negative attitudes. The first thing is to recognize that we can have attitudes, because even the disciples of Jesus had some. Then we must remember that our purpose is to be transformed so that there is in us the same attitude that Christ had.

It will help us if we focus on the great commandment, to remember how much we’re valued by God, as well as having well-defined goals so that circumstances or other people don’t affect our attitudes and make us desist from reaching the goal.

My commitment to God.

Reflection exercises and practical application.

1. From the following list, you are asked to assess yourself to identify if you have some of these bad attitudes.

Do I have this attitude?	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
• Having an aggressive attitude (Proverbs 25:24)					
• Highlighting negative aspects					
• Criticizing what others do; the natural tendency to see what's wrong and not appreciate what's right.					
• Comparison with others. "If they can do it, why can't I?"					
• Giving up without trying.					
• Undervaluing what others can do					
• Considering that others have less value, like the Pharisee's attitude toward the publican.					
• Overreacting to something bad. Instead of analyzing why something happened, tend to overreact, even with violence.					
• Resorting to emotional blackmail					
• Not allowing people to express their emotions					
• Being too authoritative					
• Not showing emotions					
• Playing the victim					
• Always being on the defensive					
• Showing aggression (Prov. 25:24)					
• Always seeing the negative side					
• Being ungrateful					
• Making fun of others					
• Defeatist attitude					
• Resorting to emotional blackmail					
• Not allowing people to express their emotions					
• Being too authoritative					
• Blaming everyone else for what happens					
• Being too competitive					

1. Pick three of your most ingrained negative attitudes and plan to overcome them

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Lesson 6

Evangelism for relational discipleship

Bible Text: Matthew 5:13-16

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

Objectives:

- **Discuss** how we should relate to others to share the gospel with them.
- **Determine** what strategies you can implement as a couple and as a family to introduce Jesus to your friends.

6.1 Introduction

We've been studying the importance of the relationships each person has with God, with oneself, and with others. Emphasis has been placed mainly on relationships within the couple and the family. But now we're going to study how our relationship should be with those who still don't have Christ as their personal Savior.

Sadly, there still are Christians who think they should stop relating to those who aren't yet Christians. This isn't the way Jesus acted during his earthly ministry. He sought every possible opportunity to relate to sinners to present the message of salvation to them.

Therefore, in this lesson we're going to focus on strategies that we can use to intentionally establish and build up relationships as a couple and family to reach those who haven't accepted Jesus as Savior. We'll study the best ways to introduce Christ to others. What is relational evangelism? What advantages does relational evangelism offer us? And what strategies can we implement to reach others for Christ?

6.2 Development

6.2.1 Some ways we can share the Good News Of the gospel

Dan Kimball (2009: 247) distinguishes two ways of doing evangelism:

- **The old-fashioned way.** Like a sales pitch, a conquest, a battle, an ultimatum, a threat, a test, an argument, a monologue, or something you have to do.
- **The current way.** Make disciples through conversation, friendship, influence, invitation, companionship, challenge, opportunity and conversation.

Certainly, evangelism as part of the friendship discipleship process is more of the kind that Dan Kimball calls "current." Similarly, emphasis has been placed on not separating evangelism from discipleship with grace. Discipling begins when we enter into meaningful relationships with people for the purpose of sharing the gospel with them. In that intentional relationship, each daily topic, each problem or circumstance becomes a possibility to show God's love in our lives.

This approach requires a change of values in evangelization (Kimball, 2009: 252), as described in the following table:

The Modern Church	The Postmodern Church
Evangelization is an event to which you invite people.	Evangelization is a process through relationships, trust and example.
Evangelization is concerned with people going to heaven.	Evangelism is concerned that people experience the reality of living under Kingdom rule now.
Evangelization focuses on pre-Christians.	Evangelization focuses on post-Christians.
Evangelization is carried out by an evangelist.	Evangelization is carried out by the disciples.
Evangelism is considered something apart from discipleship.	Evangelism is part of being a disciple.
Evangelization is a message	Evangelization is a conversation.
Mission is a department of the church.	The church is a mission.

Dan Kimball (2009: 253) points out that the emerging generations connect with the idea of living in tune with Jesus, locating themselves in the Kingdom of God, and being participants in the Kingdom now. This is in contrast to what the modern church has focused on - being with God in heaven someday. Certainly, this is a reality, but it must be the consequence of first living here according to the values of the Kingdom once Christ has transformed us with his Holy Spirit. This evangelization is characterized by:

1. Making an invitation to the Kingdom instead of offering a way to heaven.
2. It has less to do with an invitation to an event and more to do with an invitation to be part of a community. So, the sequence in this type of evangelism is (Kimball, 2009:256):
 - Establish friendship with people or bring them into fellowship with the community of faith.
 - Within this fellowship, conversation, ministry, prayer, and worship take place.
 - Over time, when they discover what you believe, they are invited to commit.
3. Evangelization is more about dialogue and listening, than about preaching and speaking.
4. Evangelism is part of the discipleship and culture of the church, rather than something done on the side.
5. Evangelization is based more on "discipleship-evangelization" than on entertainment (of the "evangelistic event").
6. Today's evangelization requires more time and trust.

6.2.2 Friendship Evangelism

A preponderant symptom of a healthy church (Galloway, 2002:40) is one that experiences relationships of Christian love (John 13:35). These love relationships aren't only for the family, the church, but must transcend every relationship that the disciple has. This includes those who haven't yet received Christ as their personal savior.

Stephen Macchia (2002:115) points out that "*The healthy church deliberately aims to foster interpersonal relationships that are expressed in love between families, between its members and towards the community it serves.*" Therefore, friendship evangelism is a tool that fits perfectly with discipleship in grace.

Relational evangelism is sharing the gospel strategically and patiently with the different groups of people with whom the disciple relates to, beginning with family, friends, and including co-workers, neighbors, etc. This must be done with patience and love, looking for every opportunity to introduce them to Christ as savior. Illustrations are usually used of what He has already been doing in the life of the disciple in a certain circumstance that is the subject of conversation with the non-believer. It's also of great value to offer some service as an act of love (to the person we are evangelizing), to show God's love.

- **The key is meaningful relationships.** This means connecting with other people. So in our walk, we need to be prayerful and attentive to our interactions and how God is leading us. It's of utmost importance to express love and unconditional acceptance (Macchia, 2002:120).
- **Following Christ's example:** The narrative of Jesus calling his first disciples has all the hallmarks of relational evangelism (Luke 5). At the beginning his ministry, Jesus called his disciples. Before meeting them, he had been healing the sick and rebuking the demons of the possessed.
- **Imitate Christ, who found ways to bless others.** Whenever Jesus found a need, he attended to it. That was Jesus' lifestyle.
- **Recognize the needs of those around us and prayerfully consider how we can meet them.** This involves fostering authenticity, perseverance, honesty, and integrity (Macchia, 2002:122). This leads to meaningful conversations with those whose needs we know. Christ turned to Peter and before asking him to follow him, he recognized that **they needed fish.** These men had families to care for and had worked through the night fishing but had been unsuccessful. After identifying the need, Christ provided for them.
- **Show grace, mercy and forgiveness.** The church has to embody God's grace and mercy in such a way that others are blessed in ways that delight God's heart (Macchia, 2002:126).
- **Be clear that not all needs are monetary.** Sometimes you can help a classmate study. Other times people just need someone to listen to them and someone to talk to or pray with. These gestures of love matter because they allow us to connect with them.

6.2.3 Biblical Foundations for Relational Evangelism

Various passages illustrate how personal evangelism was widely used by our Lord Jesus and by the early Church. For example:

- **John 1: 40-41.** "Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, 'We have found the Messiah' (that is, the Christ)."
- **John 1:45.** "Philip found Nathanael and told him, 'We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.'"
- **John 4:6-7.** "Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Will you give me a drink?'"
- **1 Peter 3:15.** "...But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..."

6.2.4 The Benefits of Friendship Evangelism

- There is no special program to run or schedule to keep. The disciple evangelizes where and when an opportunity presents itself.
- The disciple works within the spheres of influence they already have, trying to reach out to people with whom they have meaningful relationships.
- The disciples use their influence with whom they have more influence. Their friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers are much more likely to listen to them than a stranger would. Their chances for successful evangelism are greater in this group than they are with those with whom they have no association.
- Witness naturally. The disciple talks about the Lord and salvation like they would talk about other important topics. They must wait for the right time to announce the Word, instead of confronting people when it may be inappropriate.

6.2.5 Practical tips to start sharing the Good News

1. Know that you are "a person who has been born again." You can only speak to others successfully of those things that you've experienced in your own heart and life.
2. The disciple must be "filled with the Spirit." They must take care of their spiritual formation at all times.
3. They must conduct themselves uprightly, giving a good testimony. "What we are is often highlighted in such a way that people cannot hear what we say."
4. The believer must be a praying disciple. Prayer is the force that opens all doors, removes all barriers. "The church walks on its knees."
5. They must follow God's direction regarding whom to turn to, and what words to say, since only God knows which heart is prepared and what particular need that person has.

6. They should look for opportunities to talk alone with the person, since it reduces interruptions and eliminates embarrassing moments.
7. The believer must work, inspired by love for God and love for neighbor.
8. Since the difficulties of a seeker after God are reduced when they cry out to God with all sincerity, it's good to suggest kneeling as soon as possible.
9. The disciple must place himself on the same level as the person with whom they are dealing. "To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22).
10. The personal worker must not think that their work is finished when they lead someone to the feet of Christ.
11. The disciple should use their spiritual gifts as a means of service (1 Peter 4:10).

Dale Galloway (2002: 20-21) points out that in order to be more effective in communication with the person to be evangelized, one must:

- Begin by listening carefully. They need to be actively listened to and understood. You must practice empathetic listening.
- Start where they are. Listen to their needs, doubts and struggles.
- Explain basic Christianity in simple words that they understand. You can use a popular version of the Bible.
- Start with the Gospels.
- Consider the cumulative effect. Many will need multiple conversations throughout that meaningful relationship before they accept Christ as their personal savior.
- Help them feel part of the faith community.
- Encourage them to begin to apply biblical values and principles in areas of their lives, so that they experience confidence in the Bible and in God. For example, in family matters.

6.3 Conclusions

Jesus asks us to go and make disciples in his likeness. It isn't something that we should leave for certain events in the local Church. Sharing the love of Christ should be the Christian's way of life.

To witness for Christ, we must learn to build meaningful relationships with the people around us: extended family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, schoolmates, etc. Establishing meaningful relationships implies taking an interest in them, in their needs, and above all, in sharing the Good News with them.

As a couple and family, we can generate multiple options to share with others:

- We can invite our friends to see a Christian movie and then share what God has done in our life in the conversation afterwards. The same can be done by our young children with their friends.

- We can invite our friends to a dinner with a talk by a guest from the church (or someone from the family) about problems that families have.
- A mother who works at home can invite the mothers of her children's classmates, whom she sees when she drops off her children at school, to some talks around a cup of coffee on Fridays of each week.
- Be prepared with testimonials about common problems that our friends or co-workers can share with us. For example, about a health problem they are facing, about problems in their marital relationship, about financial problems. We can take advantage of and share with them how God has helped us in each case.
- The effort to share Christ must be continual.

My commitment to God.

Reflection exercises and practical application.

1. List three creative ways you and your spouse and family can share the love of Christ relationally.

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Lesson 7.

Discipleship in small group settings (house groups)

Bible Text: Acts 16: 32-34

“Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night, the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.”

Objectives:

- **Discuss** the benefits of small group discipleship
- **Determine** the ministries to develop in a small group
- **Evaluate** the possibility of forming a small group with your family and friends

7.1 Introduction

One of the strategies for growing on the journey of grace is small group discipleship. It's a strategy that can be implemented in any local church, regardless of its size or resources.

This strategy allows us, as a couple or as a family, to begin to bring the Kingdom of God closer to those with whom we have already been sharing the message of salvation. So, in this lesson we're going to study the characteristics of a small group, the advantages of discipling this way, ministries of a small house-group, and above all, we'll be challenged to form a small group with our family and friends.

7.2 Development

7.2.1 What are house or cell groups?

Pablo Deiros (2011: chap.5 p.2) mentions that all the elements of the church are found in house-groups. All the functions of the church and its mission are fully represented in the life of this type of group. The communion that exists between its members allows the group to act as a complete whole, with its own life. It's the participation of each member that keeps it alive and functioning.

César Castellanos (Deiros, 2011: chap.5 p.5) establishes that "Cells are small groups made up of people who meet at least once a week, with the aim of developing comprehensive growth focused on God's word."

7.2.2 Fundamentals of the cell church.

Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson (2008:26) state that God's nature is communal. They consider the following principles in their argument:

1. God exists in community as three persons in one.
2. God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, whose transforming relationships are a model for us.
3. Jesus prayed for the unity of all Christians.

Then Donahue and Robinson (2008:26) quote Gareth Icenogle:

The small group is a generic form of human community that is transcultural, transgenerational, and even transcendent. The calling of human beings to gather in groups is a God-created (ontological) and God-ordained (theological) ministry that springs from the very nature and purpose of his being. God as a being exists in community. The natural and simplest demonstration of the communal image of God for humanity is the meeting in small groups.

Jesus' relationship with the disciples is the perfect example of relational interdependence. Although Jesus sought to attend to the needs of the multitudes, he never neglected his "small group" of twelve. He shared his life and ministry with them, taught them, sent them out, and then left it to them to continue his ministry.

In John 17, Jesus presents God's ideal for his children: that they live in unity. His prayer is "that they may be one, the same as we are." Donahue and Robinson (2008:36) put it this way. Jesus is telling us "I want you to find the kind of unity that we experience in the Trinity."

Donahue and Robinson (2008:44) emphasize that in addition to being designed for a life in community, God also designed us to live in interdependence. (Gen. 2:18, 21-24; Eph. 5:28,31). They then describe the blessings received through community:

- We receive strength to face the storms of life.
- We receive wisdom for important decisions.
- We experience responsibility which is vital for growth.
- We find acceptance is found, which helps to restore wounds.

Gareth Icenogle (Donahue & Robinson, 2008: 69) mention that:

Small groups are microcosms of the community of God's creation. Every time two or more people come together, they become a true reflection of the image and likeness of God. Small groups are the fundamental arena where we can image the redeeming presence of God or project human destructive systems. Every small or large gathering of people exists in this tension of manifesting an inhuman structure or embodying redemptive relationships by the work of God.

7.2.3 The early church model

The Bible abounds with examples of the Church meeting in homes. They can be cited (Deiros, 2011: chap. 1, 17):

- The disciples praying in the upper room after the ascension of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 1:3)
- Luke reports that every day, the disciples "continued to meet together in the temple courts," and adds the detail that "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts" (Acts 2:46).

- Acts 5:42 affirms the dual meeting place of Jerusalem Christians: in the temple for prayer and public witness, and from house to house for discipleship.
- When Peter was in prison, “the church was earnestly praying to God for him” (Acts 12:5). When Peter was miraculously released, he went to the place where the church was gathered in prayer for him, that is, “he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying (Acts 12:12).
- Other houses outside Jerusalem and in the missionary diaspora in which the Lord's church met are also mentioned, citing only the book of Acts: the house of Lydia of Thyatira in Philippi (Acts 16:15), the house of Jason in Thessalonica (Acts 17:4–7), the house of Titius Justus in Corinth (Acts 18:7), and the house that Paul rented in Rome for two years (Acts 20:20)

7.2.4 Ministries that take place in house-groups

Pablo Deiros (2011, chap.6 p.5) establishes as main Ministries of a small group:

- **Prayer** is fundamental to the life and growth of the church, especially intercessory prayer. Joel Comiskey (Deiros, 2011: chap.6 p.6) points out that:

House groups that pray are powerful groups. The Holy Spirit is raising up a new prayer cell movement across the earth, and the house church is in a strategic position to carry it forward. Prayer fits naturally into the worship time of a cell meeting (Rev. 5:8, 9). ... Part of the responsibility of the members of a house group is to intercede for a world that doesn't know Jesus Christ. Each group has its own Jerusalem (neighborhood), and it's probably best to start there. ...Along with praying for non-Christian friends, pray also for those who will start the new group.

- **Integration.** Integration between the members of the group must be promoted, as well as integration with those of the other groups that make up the church.
- **Work distribution.** The universal priesthood is exercised through mobilizing all of God's people (1 Peter 2:5, 9, 10). No one is excluded from making disciples and from actively participating in the life and witness of the body of Christ.
- **Obedience.** Each disciple is focused on lovingly and unconditionally obeying Jesus as Lord and Head of the church. Thus, his sovereign will over that of the disciples is maximized.
- **Celebration.** We celebrate in worship and thanksgiving
- Triple function: **evangelization, pastoral care and leadership development.** As Deiros points out (2011: chap.6 p.8), this triple function in small groups is easier to manage and more far-reaching than if the church as a whole is taken and centralized according to the traditional model.

- **Leadership development.** Joel Comiskey (Deiros, 2011: chap.6 p.9) points out that:
 "Pastoral leadership must trust the Holy Spirit to work through those who want to serve Jesus; you must show enthusiasm and you must have a clear testimony. As God raises up potential leaders, they need to be recognized as such by the cell leaders."
- **Multiplication.** Beginning with evangelism, the new Christians being discipled should be encouraged to attend the house-group. Here the significant intentional relationships of the members play an important role.
- **Spiritual development.** The closest spiritual accompaniment of the members of the group is essential. Accountability here plays a central role.
- **Community.** Kingdom values must be cultivated to achieve a *shalom* community, similar to the one that Christ developed with his disciples.
- **Compassion** for the lost. There are opportunities to minister first in the immediate context of the small group, without missing other opportunities such as hospitals, etc.
- **Use of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.** The opportunity to use the members' gifts in ministries that are right for them is increased through small groups.

7.2.4 Advantages and disadvantages

A. Advantages of bringing Discipleship to small groups

Small groups, also called cells groups or house groups, have several advantages:

- You can bring new guests who would not usually come to church. Larry Stockstill (2000: 21) recognizes the great advantage that small groups offer when they are designed from their establishment to attract people who aren't yet believers.
- When there are several house-groups established, the average attendance increases.
- More people can have the opportunity to put their gifts into practice. In each small group, you have several people serving simultaneously. The one who teaches, the one who leads the biblical reflection or preaching, the one who serves the refreshments, etc.
- Having real fellowship increases the possibility that they'll remain. John Wesley was always concerned with closing the "back door" through discipleship using small groups.

B. Disadvantages of discipleship house groups bringing to life groups:

- Some elementary resources in the houses of the brothers where the meeting will take place are needed.
- Sometimes it's difficult to persuade some teachers to work in cell groups
- If there are children in the group, it isn't always possible to have an alternative arrangement and they'll have to stay with the adults.
- It's difficult for people of the same level of spiritual maturity to coincide in a house group.

7.2.5 Practical suggestions for doing Discipleship in small groups:

- Groups can be integrated by some special characteristic: singles, single moms, teen mothers, women, young people, among others.
- If you want to use PPT projections, you can connect to a flat screen TV.
- It's convenient to have a special area for children, according to their age.
- Empower older children to support the teacher(s).
- If difficult cases are detected in which more counseling is required, encourage them to go to the Pastor.
- New ministries may arise to serve certain sectors of the church.
- New converts additionally take their basic discipleship in a separate group.
- Keep in touch throughout the week. Use the resources you have at hand (FaceBook, WhatsApp, etc.).

7.3 Conclusions

We've analyzed the characteristics of a small group. We've seen that discipling in this way offers us many advantages. We've also learned that the ministries of a small group are basically the same as those of the local Church to which the group belongs.

Now it's time to evaluate if it's pertinent to form a small group with our family and friends. Let's keep in mind the experiences of the Philippian jailer who brought his whole family when Paul and Silas went to his house, and the results that were obtained. (Acts 16:16-34)

My commitment to God.

Reflection exercises and practical application.

1. Evaluate the possibility of implementing a small group in your home with your friends and family.

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Lesson 8

The church's social responsibility

Bible Text: Luke 6:35

“Do good... without expecting to get anything back.”

Objectives:

- **Analyze** the actions of Christ and the early church to help those in need.
- **Determine** which ministries can be developed as a family, small group or church.

8.1 Introduction

God has called us to holiness. But as Wesley understood it, it's relational holiness in which the greatest evidence is love in action towards those around us, especially towards those most in need.

Jesus himself, and then the early church, left us this legacy that has been present since the beginning of the Church of the Nazarene. For this reason, we're going to study the model that Jesus left us about being compassionate and taking action that helps others reach all the potentialities that God has for them.

For this, we need to use the lens that Jesus used when seeing the needs of the various sectors of his time with the greatest need, such as the poor, the sick, women, widows, among others. Then, we'll be able to design plans as a couple to implement actions in our family and local church. Let's remember that the essence is to be transformed and then act accordingly.

8.2 Development

8.2.1 Reflecting God's love in our relationships like Jesus did

To analyze how the disciple should be towards others, we need to keep in mind the example that our Lord Jesus left us. Some characteristics of this are (Wood, 1972):

- He was moved by love for his neighbor, to the point of giving his life for them. (John 3:16)
- He valued women, who in the Jewish context had little or no value
- He was concerned about people's well-being, including their health.
- He understood people's emotions and sought to heal them (Samaritan woman, widow who lost her child, the mother of a girl with spiritual problems, etc.)
- He gave a special place to children, who in that context were ignored. (Matthew 19:14)
- He loved those who failed, always giving opportunities to those who made mistakes. (Luke 15:11-32)
- He focused on the needs of others, even before his own. (Matthew 19:36)
- He forgave those who attacked him, showing love in action. (Luke 23:24)

Within the characteristics of the Kingdom that Jesus announces to us, Jesus' concern for the poor stands out, as he sought out the most discriminated against in society, including lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors, etc. The Kingdom brings with it demands, among them, for example, the command to love God and others as we love ourselves. The nature of the Kingdom is reflected in a relational holiness that is manifested through loving others.

8.2.2 The social responsibility of the early church

Social responsibility was part of the identity of the early Church. Concern for the poor was an obvious part of the life of the congregation. The model that the early Church left us has great teachings (Wood, 1972):

- They sold their property to support the needs of others. (Acts 4:32-37)
- Shared meals together as a Christian community when they came together to receive teaching. (Acts 6)
- Gave generously to communities facing famine (Acts 11:27-30; 12:17). On many occasions, there were Churches like the one in Macedonia that, in the midst of persecution and even in scarcity, gave with great generosity. (2 Cor. 8:1-7)
- Healed through miracles. (Acts 3:1-10; 5:15; 28:8)
- Liberated those who were oppressed by evil spirits. (Acts 8:4-13)
- Cared for prisoners, who were usually in prison because of their belief in Christ. (Hebrews 13:3)
- Provided hospitality (Romans 12:13)
- Promoted better conditions for slaves. (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:4)
- Promoted respect for rulers. (1 Tim. 2:1,2; Rom. 13:1-7)

Kjell Nordstockke (1998) mentions that the transformational love of God changed the way of relating to others, which contrasts with the pagan environment.

8.2.3 General Guidelines on Compassion in the Church of the Nazarene

The Church of the Nazarene has established as guidelines in the Nazarene Essentials (2015:37-39):

1. *Purposeful compassion manifests the loving heart of God.*

That God sent his Son into the world and that Jesus died for the benefit of mankind are the ultimate gifts of God's love and compassion. God gave us his Son out of the abundance of his love so that we might have eternal life. God's love for humanity is expressed in believers' genuine acts of compassion toward God's creation.

2. *Purposeful compassion is always done in the name of Jesus*

Jesus was compassionately moved in love and care for the poor, the lost, the sick, the outcast, and the vulnerable. We do every act of service, of generosity in the name of Jesus, and offer efforts that reveal the love of Jesus (Mt 10:42).

3. Purposeful compassion respects the dignity of each person.

God's people offer hope, love, and help in Jesus' name in a way that honors each person as made in God's image. Compassion has no other motive than to extend the love of God in Christ.

4. Purposeful compassion flows naturally from transformed believers.

The church is called to embody the love and compassion of God. The compassionate call touches all areas of life in an integral way. It transforms the heart of the believer, who in turn works to bring about the physical, social and spiritual transformation of the world.

5. Purposeful compassion is our Wesleyan definition of holistic mission.

We believe that the Father is already at work by the power of the Holy Spirit in the life of each person, and we're called to work alongside him in this good work. We are drawn to each other in loving friendship and community, which has social consequences.

6. Purposeful compassion flows from our lives as an expression of our commitment to God's mission to redeem a broken world.

It seeks to see, hear and respond to a broken and wounded humanity in the same way that God does. We seek to invest all available resources to alleviate human suffering and pursue God's plans for restoration, wholeness, salvation, and peace in the world.

8.2.4 Holistic mission: impacting the local community

The church is required to relate to the world. The local church must fulfill the part of the mission that it has to develop, and it needs to move in a social space and in a political context, but without losing its identity. The church must identify the needs of the world and seek to help. The following are the requirements or conditions:

The *first condition* is to recognize the lordship of Christ. This in turn implies that:

- He wants us all to participate
- His community is us, his church
- We must acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord
- He exercises sovereignty over human life

The *second condition* is radical discipleship which implies:

- Christian discipleship is a lifestyle to be followed.
- Love and justice are reflected in practice.
- The church must embody Gospel values.
- It implies obedience to God.
- It takes place in community.
- The Church is an essential part of God's mission; it must proclaim Christ.

The *third condition* is to be a new humanity initiated in Jesus Christ that:

- must identify with the people and extend the work of Christ.
- is called to proclaim always the exaltation of Christ.
- reaches out the cross of Jesus to all.
- continues to proclaim Jesus' resurrection.

The *fourth condition* is to exercise gifts and ministries.

If we make the fulfillment of holistic mission a top priority and add it to the great commandment, the church must impact the community in various ways:

- By bringing the message of hope in Christ.
- By promoting Christian compassion by example.
- By promoting a culture of peace in the violent times in which we live.
- By raising our voice against everything that is sinful. Actions such as rejection of laws in favor of abortion, etc. are included.

8.3 Conclusions

1. God wants us all to develop the gifts, abilities, and talents that He gave us to share the message of salvation. He also asks us to show love to others by helping meet part of their needs. It's time to evaluate what ministry we as a couple and family can implement to help those in need.

My commitment to God.

Reflection exercises and practical application

1. Consider as a couple and family or small group what ministry you can implement to help those in need.

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Bible Text: Colossians 4:6

"Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

Objectives:

- **Analyze** what style of communication we use: assertive, passive or aggressive.
- **Develop** active listening skills that help improve our relationships.

9.1 Introduction

Have you ever thought about how you and your partner communicate? Have you stopped to consider what words you use, if your tone of voice is appropriate, if your gestures adequately reinforce communication? Still more, do you tell your spouse about what you think or what you feel? Does your partner feel free to genuinely express what they think and feel? Do you know that timing is usually as important as what you say?

Adequate communication as a couple is a key factor for that relationship to be healthy, to work and to be maintained. This is because communication within the relationship of a couple has an impact on various aspects: on their mutual well-being, on the type of relationship, the degree of intimacy, the type of coexistence, degree of satisfaction, etc. (Ruiz, 2019).

In this lesson, we're going to learn that there are ways of communicating that strengthen the relationship between the couple, the family and with others. We'll see the advantages of using so-called assertive communication and how to promote it. But we'll also notice what happens when using other types of communications such as passive and aggressive ways.

9.2 Development

9.2.1 What is assertiveness?

Raquel Lemos (2020) points out that among all the communicative styles that exist, assertiveness is one of the most effective. However, few people are capable of putting it into practice, especially in their affective relationships.

Assertiveness is a social skill that allows for developing a "behavior that **expresses feelings and thoughts of an individual in an honest way** without hurting those of others." Lemos (2020)

Maite Nicuesa (n.d.) points out that:

Assertive communication implies the expression of thoughts and feelings and becoming aware, not only of one's own personal rights, but also of those of the other. Assertive communication is based on the right of every human being to express themselves as they are. In the context of the couple, it's important to reinforce the use of the word 'us' to become aware of being a team. But when it comes to individual needs, don't hesitate to use the word 'I.'

A. Differences in communication styles

Below are some of the main characteristics that are present in people who use these styles of communication (Comunicare, n.d.). The person who applies **assertive communication**:

- Shows interest and sincerity.
- They defend their beliefs and values.
- Uses consistent body language, which improves communication.
- Uses the right gestures, which help add emphasis.
- Uses a level and modulated tone, as it's more convincing and acceptable, and it isn't intimidating.
- Uses judgment to maximize responsiveness and impact.
- Are aware that the how, where and when of their comments can be as important as WHAT they say.
- Expresses needs clearly but respectfully.
- Treats others with respect.
- Strengthens relationships by using this type of communication.
- Reinforces self-esteem and that of the person with whom they are communicating.
- Uses clear language to convey the message.

The person who uses **passive communication** is characterized by:

- Sometimes they say "yes" when they really want to say "no". (Matthew 5: 37)
- They tend to have feelings of frustration and sometimes anger since they don't express their emotions.
- They are shy and may not speak up when the situation calls for it.
- They have extreme sensitivity
- People with a passive communication style are always aware of how they think they are expressing themselves to others.
- They often apologize for having different feelings or opinions than others.

- Being overconfident in the direction or points of view of others is another trait of a passive communicator.
- They are afraid that if they say what they feel, they'll offend or upset another person, so they often use long, rambling sentences or beat around the bush.
- They believe it's rude or selfish to say what they want to.
- They worry about upsetting others if they assert themselves.

People who use **aggressive communication**:

- Possess a type of personality that tends to intimidate others. (Proverbs 16:32)
- Impose their needs or opinions on others.
- Often bully or push others around.
- They only care about their needs.
- Don't usually compromise.
- Damage relationships.
- May resort to raising their voice or physical aggression.
- Damage the self-esteem of other people with whom they communicate.
- Discuss, argue, or try to get the other person to agree with them.
- They aren't usually willing to negotiate in a conflict.

9.2.2 What advantages does assertiveness bring?

Assertive communication is also very effective for setting limits. For example, if your partner frequently breaks previous agreements.

Some advantages of using assertive communication are (Lora, n.d.):

- It makes it easier to earn people's respect because, by communicating assertively, we stand up for our rights and set our own limits.
- It helps us control our emotions because we can talk about them openly.
- It gives us the confidence to ask for what we want because we realize the value behind doing it.
- It improves others' self-esteem.
- It reduces the stress that may exist in the relationship.
- Relationships between the couple and family members are improved.
- Family conflicts are reduced.

9.2.3 How can assertiveness be developed?

» Express what we think and feel

We must learn to express our ideas, emotions and feelings. For example, there may be things that we don't like, but we don't show them, such as:

- In the case of women, they may not agree that their husbands don't let them work.
- There may be differences in how the family budget is distributed.
- You may not agree on how to educate your children.
- Not feeling supported in housework.

There may also be minor things that accumulate over time and make the "backpack" of unpleasant things that we carry without expressing it heavier. For example:

- Perhaps one of the spouses likes to do an exercise routine at home, listening to loud music in the background.

» Remember the needs of others.

By considering the needs of your partner or relatives, it will be easier to discuss the problem or matter of interest. The family is built based on purposes that affect everyone. It's no longer about what you seek versus what your spouse seeks.

» Learn to speak for ourselves.

We must take responsibility for our emotions and express what we're feeling, without blaming others. Avoid pointing by saying "you have done", "you are this", "you are that" and, instead, openly show your own opinions and ideas, emotions, and feelings, saying "I think", "I believe", "I wish," for example:

- Express that I feel bad when my partner chooses the place to go for a walk or vacation without taking me into account.
- If one of the spouses comes home with their friends without warning, this can make the other feel uncomfortable. How would you express it from the point of view of the spouse who feels uncomfortable?

» Before attacking, it's better to ask.

We must help each other. If my partner or family member makes me see something that they don't like, before "fighting back," we should ask what they mean more specifically and see what we can do together to solve it. For example:

- If one of the spouses tells the other that they don't agree with how they spend the family budget, they shouldn't respond with anger. They must act assertively and ask about what the person is trying to express. Then together they need to find a solution.
- If one of the spouses says "I don't like how you treat the children," how should we approach this assertively?

» **Think before speaking.**

A popular saying says "It's good to say what we think, not to keep it inside. But it's better to think about what we say and how we say it." This means that we must be careful of the ways and times in which we address those issues that are most difficult for us as a couple or family.

Maite Nicuesa (n.d.) points out that there are words that should be reinforced within the couple's dialogue, such as thank you, I'm sorry, and please. Likewise, it's better to avoid absolute terms such as "always" or "never."

Respect within a couple is very important. Therefore, avoid criticizing your partner's family.

» **Avoid assumptions.**

It's always better to ask and not presuppose what the other thinks or feels or what the reason for what he does or says. *I share a story with you.* It's said that a small town held a wedding in a church. The time came when the pastor asked if there was any reason that the wedding shouldn't be carried out, and if someone felt that way, they should come to the front. Suddenly there was a deathly silence when a young woman with a child in her arms got up from her seat in the back and headed towards the front. You can already imagine how the exclamations of surprise and indignation rose as the young woman advanced with the little one in her arms. The bride, when she saw this, turned around when she saw what was happening; she got very angry, and ran out of the church, but not before throwing some insults at her boyfriend, and in passing, at that young woman.

Many people came out behind the bride to comfort her, but the commotion was already so great that the pastor decided to call the wedding off. In the end, he was left almost alone with that young woman who, with a surprised face, didn't understand what was happening. The pastor dared to ask her what she wanted to express, although in part he presupposed her answer as well as the bride and guests.

Great was his surprise when he heard the young woman say. "I just wanted to go to the front because back there I could hear almost nothing...and by the way to take some photos of the bride and groom."

Over time it became known that the girl was the photographer that the "wedding planner" had sent to the event. By the way, the bride has not been heard of again. Draw your own conclusions.

9.3 Conclusions

Assertive communication is a social skill that must be developed. If you have the couple and the family on that path, then it will be easier to develop that ability.

Although it's a social skill, Christian principles must be in everyone's heart for that skill to be acquired. Consider some of them:

- Have self-control - that implies proper management of emotions.

- Start from loving our neighbors.
- Exercise forgiveness every time we make a mistake.
- Develop healthy self-esteem
- Have empathy.

So we must start, keeping in mind that together we'll learn, and mutual tolerance is important.

My commitment to God

Reflection exercises and practical application.

1. Make a comparative table that summarizes the main characteristics of each communication style.

Assertive Communication	Passive Communication	Aggressive Communication

2. Self-Administer a Test to see which communication style you use most frequently. Below are some links where you can investigate
 - https://hr4free.com/PDF_Files/Blog_EN_Management_assertiveness_assessment_questionnaire.pdf
 - <https://bookboon.com/blog/2013/07/20-questions-to-find-out-how-assertive-and-self-aware-you-really-are/>
 - <https://www.nswnma.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/How-Assertive-are-You-Questionnaire-FS.pdf>
 - <https://envisioncounsellingcentre.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Assertiveness-Quiz.pdf>

Comment if you agree with the results and argue why or why not.

-
3. Choose a possible topic or problem that you want to address as a couple or family relationship. For example:
- How to make money go further
 - How to educate the children
 - How to get each other to collaborate more in household chores. Assume in this case that both work outside the home.
 - Choose something else

Then do the exercise of developing the possible "dialogue" that would take place if:

- a) One of the spouses was passive and the other aggressive
- b) If both used assertive communication
- c) If one of them used assertive communication and the other aggressive communication

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Lesson 10. **Avoiding Toxic Relationships Part I**

Bible Text: Titus 3:3-5

"At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."

Objectives:

- Identify behaviors that damage our relationships.
- Recognize those harmful behaviors that are present in our relationships.
- Take the necessary measures to eliminate those behaviors that damage our relationships, with God's help.

10.1 Introduction

We've studied in the first lessons that we are beings designed by God to be relational. We relate to God, to ourselves and to others. We've also studied some characteristics that distinguished Jesus in his relationships with others, such as love, forgiveness, attending to the needs of others, giving the value that God has given to women and children, applying the Golden Rule in our relationships, and serving others, among others.

But now it's time to analyze those behaviors that can negatively affect our relationships. These characteristics can be possessed by other people with whom we interact. But if we're honest, perhaps we may find that some of these behaviors may be present in us.

For this reason, in this and the next two lessons, we're going to study the behaviors that are harmful in our relationships. What has caused them to reach that behavior? How can they harm our relationships? What the Bible teaches us about them? And what must we do to solve them?

10.2 Development

10.2.1 What is a toxic person?

The on-line dictionary defines toxic as something which is “very harmful or unpleasant in a pervasive or insidious way.” It’s like a poison that can cause **damage to our health** and even **death** when a living being comes into contact with it. Toxic substances generally cause unwanted side effects.

The term toxic can also be used as a noun. The greater the effectiveness of a toxin, the greater its toxicity: this notion refers to the level of damage that it can cause to a person, an animal or a plant.

Just as a highly toxic product is poisonous or can cause disorders or death as a result of injuries due to a chemical effect, we assume that there are people who are also toxic. Toxic people are those who, by having a negative mentality, affect our lives, hindering healthy development. The toxic person tends to want to control everything and everyone. Toxic people make us unhappy and harm us. They are people who only think about themselves.

Julia Máxima (209) points out that:

*Toxic people aren't **necessarily individuals with psychological or psychiatric pathologies** (psychopaths), they may be people with emotional obstacles who haven't yet developed symptoms or diseases of this type. However, if the problems aren't addressed in time, they can generate the emergence of psychological pathologies of different complexities in the person themselves and in their entire environment of influence.*

But we must use the “label” of toxic people with care. Cristina Roda, quoted by David Aparicio (2017), warns us:

Calling someone toxic is not harmless. In fact, it can be a very serious attack, a cruel insult disguised by the moral authority that reading a couple of self-help books can give you, with no greater commitment or intention to reading them than to delegate responsibility to others.

The term toxic is easy to understand, it has strength because of its poisonous resonance. In the imaginary, it alludes to a substance of variable color, sticky, flammable and with which you have to be very careful. In this sense, when we say that something is toxic, we're saying that it's not trustworthy, in itself, because of the way it is.

Similarly, Oscar Morales (n.d.) makes us see that about the word "toxic" that:

The definition of this word takes us back to a substance that is dangerous, that can be poisonous and that has the ability to harm us or even cause death due to its chemical properties; that is, something that by its very nature is bad, frightening, dirty, corrupt, horrendous, demeaning, etc.

Therefore, we recommend not using the term "toxic person" indiscriminately. Let's recognize people who need God's grace in their hearts, and whose emotions and personality lead them to send us signals asking for help.

10.2.2 Does the Bible talk about toxic people?

The Bible doesn't use the term "toxic people." We can say that the term is relatively new. Bernardo Stamateas wrote a book called Toxic People (2009) from a Christian perspective. He contributed to the attention given to this type of personality, which is harmful in its relationships with others. However, the Bible repeatedly warns us to beware of such people. Some passages that speak of this type of person are:

The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (Proverbs 12:18)

But no human being can tame the tongue. It's a restless evil, full of deadly poison. (James 3:8)

Their venom is like the venom of a snake, like that of a cobra that has stopped its ears. (Psalm 58:4)

O Rescue me, LORD, from evildoers; protect me from the violent, who devise evil plans in their hearts and stir up war every day. They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent's; the poison of vipers is on their lips. (Psalm 140:1-3)

We could identify some characters who behaved in a toxic way:

- King Saul is an example of a biblical character who was a toxic person.
- The Pharisees had this kind of behavior
- Nabal, Abigail's husband in the Old Testament, was quite toxic.

After analyzing the characteristics of toxic people in this lesson and in the next two, it will be easier for you to identify other characters who had toxic relationships.

10.2.3 Characteristics of a toxic person

According to Sonia Castro (2022), some characteristics of toxic people are:

A. They provoke unpleasant emotions in us.

When interacting with them, we don't feel comfortable. We prefer not to address many important issues and to be as superficial as possible to prevent them from starting to express their ideas loaded with a negative connotation.

After each conversation with such a person, you remain "intoxicated" by so much negativity. They make us feel negative emotions and we usually end up exhausted because they steal our energy.

B. The relationship is completely one-sided in favor of the toxic person.

Toxic people are narcissistic and only think about themselves. They may pretend to do something for others; however they often have an ulterior motive that will benefit them. For example, in 2 Samuel 15, we learn about how Absalom was gaining the support of the people, but he was doing it in order to dethrone David.

C. They show themselves as victims.

Toxic people always show themselves as victims and want everyone to know it. They obviously argue that nothing that happens to them is their fault. Self-pity is always present, as they like to appear as a martyr. The way they express themselves to others can cause whoever listens to begin to think poorly of those mentioned by the toxic person without knowing that it's often an exaggeration or a lie.

It's best to avoid telling them that we feel sorry for them, because that is "the fuel" that makes them continue in their role as victims.

D. They like to manipulate others.

Toxic people deceive other people to achieve their goals. Bernardo Stamateas (2009) suggests a series of indicators to know if we're being manipulated (or if we're the manipulators). Some of them are:

- You have a hard time expressing your own ideas and you end up accepting things you don't agree with without giving your opinion.
- You have had to give up goals or desires because your partner (or another person) didn't agree with you and imposed other things on you,
- They limit your growth in terms of your professional preparation or your improvement in the labor field.

Manipulative people are characterized by:

- They'll seek to make themselves **indispensable** in order to take control. An example in the Bible is the case of Absalom who wanted to usurp the throne of his father
"He would get up early and stand by the side of the road leading to the city gate. Whenever anyone came with a complaint to be placed before the king for a decision, Absalom would call out to him, "What town are you from?"

He would answer, "Your servant is from one of the tribes of Israel." Then Absalom would say to him, "Look, your claims are valid and proper, but there is no representative of the king to hear you." And Absalom would add, "If only I were appointed judge in the land! Then everyone who has a complaint or case could come to me and I would see that they receive justice" 2 Samuel 15:2-4.

- They **appear to take actions that benefit others**. Like the case of the Pharisees who wanted to kill Jesus

"If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation." Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish" John 11:48-50.

- They seek to **manage the emotions of others**. Like the case of Delilah with Samson: *Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when you won't confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven't told me the secret of your great strength." With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was sick to death of it. So, he told her everything. "No razor has ever been used on my head," he said, "because I have been a Nazirite dedicated to God from my mother's womb" Judges 16:15-17a.*

- They **use blackmail**.

- They often **use flattery** as a tactic to control others. Like the case of the rulers who biased the king against Daniel

So, these administrators and satraps went as a group to the king and said: "May King Darius live forever! The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown into the lions' den. Now, Your Majesty, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed" (Daniel 6:6-8).

- **Create confrontations between people**. Let's see the case of Haman who predisposes King Xerxes against the Jews and especially against Mordecai.

Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king's administrators for the royal treasury" (Esther 3:8-9).

- They have **low self-esteem**.

- **They make you doubt, affecting your confidence.** There's an effect called "gaslighting", which refers to the emotional abuse that a controller exerts on another person. In that relationship, he will make you doubt that he has said or done something, treating the other person as if she "was crazy." Over time, the controlled person comes to doubt whether or not it's true that something happened or was said.
- **They lack empathy,** so they aren't interested in others. Therefore, he only cares about achieving his achievements, even seeking to sabotage those of others.
- **They take advantage of the kindness of others** and will always try to get some personal advantage out of them. For example, knowing that you are a Christian, they'll always try to ask you for some help "because you are a Christian and you are obliged to help them".
- They are experts in **generating guilt** to take advantage of others. They'll make you feel that you owe them something, and with this they seek to take control of you.
- **They get angry easily.** Therefore, the point comes where the controlled person doesn't contradict him and begins to fall into his game.
- They give **destructive criticism.**
- They are **obsessed with projecting a good image.**
- They are **insecure people,** so in their interpersonal relationships they try to pretend that only he or she has the absolute truth.
- They develop an ability **to find the weaknesses of others.** Then they'll use them to hurt and weaken them.
- They **don't accept responsibility for their own actions.** They won't accept that they are wrong.
- They **feign ignorance** to try to hide their true intentions.
- They aren't **interested in reaching agreements.** Therefore, in a conflict, they won't be willing to negotiate or consider the needs of the other person.

Angela Gual (n.d.) shares these ways to defend ourselves against manipulative people:

- Be aware that they are manipulating us. With this they are violating some of our basic rights:
 - The right to be treated with respect.

- The right to express your feelings, opinions and ideas.
 - The right to set your own priorities.
 - The right to say NO without feeling guilty.
 - The right to defend yourself against external aggression, whether physical or emotional.
- Learn to keep an emotional distance from that person who tries to manipulate us. Don't give them permission to hurt you.
 - Don't accept the guilt that the controller wants to attribute to you for everything that happens to him or her.
 - Use a series of key questions in your relationship with that person as a filter.
 - Do you think that what you are asking of me is reasonable or minimally fair?
 - According to you... what would I have to answer?
 - Are you asking me or are you just telling me?

Take the time that is necessary to respond to what is demanded of you.

- Be firm in your affirmations without hesitation in your communication. They are experts at looking for a weak point to counterattack.

E. They are passive.

Although they complain about everything, there is really very little or nothing they are willing to do to change the situation that afflicts them. They aren't willing to do different things to overcome their lacks or needs. For example, if they don't get the job they want, they don't explore other options or prepare for other careers.

This passivity usually leads them to live with mediocrity.

F. They are very envious (Prov. 14:30).

Let me start with this fable by Aesop, a Greek philosopher who lived between the 7th and 6th centuries BC. It's called "The Serpent and the Firefly." Legend has it that once a snake started chasing a firefly; it was quickly fleeing from the ferocious predator, but the snake wasn't going to give up. She flew one day and the snake didn't give up, two days and nothing. On the third day, the Firefly stopped and feigning exhaustion, she said to the snake:

Wait, I give up, but before you catch me, let me ask you a few questions.

I'm not used to answering anyone's questions, but since I plan to devour you, you can ask me.

Do I belong to your food chain?

Nope.

Did I do you any wrong?

Nope.
So why do you want to finish me off?
Because I can't stand to see you shine.

The firefly dared to collect this information because she wanted to understand the situation that clearly seemed pointless to her. Once aware of the envy of the snake, she just smiled and flew even higher and faster, so the snake was left wanting that luminous morsel that proved to be out of reach. In a final wink of her light, the little winged bug yelled at the snake, high above it, "It's time for you to learn to shine yourself in such a beautiful way that even we fireflies observe with admiration your great brilliance."

This fable shows us that a toxic person is envious. That is, he is bothered by what others have or have achieved. They don't observe or recognize the sacrifice and effort that it has cost the other person to achieve success that can be seen reflected in a job promotion, for example.

10.3 Conclusions

One suggestion is that preferably we try to avoid the use of the term "toxic people". I perceive that it's a term that's used very widely, because when reviewing the literature, I realize that this term contains dozens of characteristics that can identify a person as toxic. We better recognize that they are people in need of God's grace, and that in many instances, they've been wounded and therefore their personality has been seriously damaged by the enemy. Recognizing others as "toxic" and not recognizing any of these behaviors in our own person already makes us one of them by not exercising self-criticism.

In addition, labeling others as toxic people unconsciously makes us turn on a yellow warning light that tells us "stay away, danger!". That, in turn, should cause us to see them as a neighbor who urgently needs God's grace, just as we need it day by day.

On the other hand, it should be noted that, although in this lesson and in the two subsequent ones we'll analyze some of these characteristics, it isn't required that all or most of them be present in a person. A person can produce harmful relationships even with one, two or three of these characteristics.

We must also recognize that by the end of this and the next two lessons, we may identify that we're engaging in some form of harmful behavior ourselves. With God's help and his grace, we must move forward in our spiritual formation, seeking to further our transformation into the likeness of Christ.

As we study envy as a toxic behavior, we must recognize that it doesn't stand alone. Envy goes hand in hand with other harmful behaviors, such as criticism, gossip, dependency, and reluctance. All of these are attitudes that consume our strength, that make us "excellent opinionologists", but poor builders of our own lives.

My commitment to God.

Reflection exercises and practical application.

Make an analysis of the negative behaviors that we have studied. Do you recognize any of them in your life? Talk to your spouse about it, but be tolerant of criticism.

Harmful behavior	How much do I have	What can I do to overcome it?
They provoke unpleasant emotions. They have one-sided relationships. They appear as the victim. They are passive people. They like to manipulate others. They are envious.		

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Lesson 11. **Avoiding Toxic Relationships Part II**

Bible Text: 2 Timothy 3:1-5

"But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people."

Objectives:

- Identify behaviors that damage our relationships.
- Recognize those harmful behaviors that are present in our relationships.
- Take the necessary measures to eliminate those behaviors that damage our relationships, with God's help.

11.1 Introduction

In the previous lesson, we studied some characteristics of toxic people. As a reminder:

- They cause unpleasant emotions.
- Their relationships are one-sided.
- They show themselves as victims.
- They are passive people.
- They like to manipulate others.
- They are envious.

Now we'll proceed to analyze other characteristics of toxic people.

11.2 Development

11.2.1 Emotions that toxic people produce in us.

It's important to note that there are different types of toxic people. In general, they're people who alter our mood. They're people who haven't matured emotionally. Cristina Agud (2021) points out that "They tend to relate in an absorbing way, exhausting, stressing and/or depressing the people around them."

Some of the emotions that a toxic person can generate in you are (Agud, 2021):

- They kill your energy or optimism.
- They make it hard for you to express your point of view or opinion.

- They make you feel guilty or ashamed.
- They frustrate you because your efforts to cheer them up are never enough.
- You fear being close to that person.
- You feel obligated to take care of them, attend to them or protect them.
- You feel controlled by that person.

11.2.2 Characteristics of Toxic People

A. They're always talking about how badly they've suffered in the past.

They usually spend time talking about all the difficulties they've faced. They'll hardly talk about the good things that have happened to them, about what they've achieved, about the blessings of God. They like to be the center of attention for others to listen and mourn with them over the many "tragedies" that have happened.

B. They're self-centered people.

They spend their time talking about themselves. To whatever is said to them, they'll respond "Me too...". It can be to talk about achievements, walks, children, etc. But even if they talk about diseases, there will be something they have to say starting again with the "I...".

In the *Manual de Marriage Ministries* (Rodríguez, 2021), we analyze the characteristics of a narcissistic person:

- Their self-esteem is overrated and borders on the extreme.
- They believe they deserve special treatment or privileged treatment.
- They tend to devalue other people.
- They'll demerit the achievements of others: "it was lucky that you achieved it", "if I had the support that he has, I would do things better."
- They have little empathy in personal relationships.
- They have a great need to be admired.
- They focus their attention on themselves.
- They tend to be arrogant. They talk about themselves, using themselves as an example in many cases, highlighting their achievements, etc.
- They try to manipulate others into something that suits the narcissist.
- In the family, first they'll seek to have everything that they consider they deserve (brand clothing, car, etc.) and then they'll think about the needs of their family.

Since narcissists lack empathy, we recommend reading the 2021 *Marriage Ministry Handbook* to learn how to help them.

C. They lack tact and empathy.

Their self-centeredness causes them not to listen to other people. They have no interest in the feelings and emotions of others. Therefore, they won't seek to do something for others.

Many times, they won't be aware of the negative impact of their words or actions on others. That's because of their lack of empathy combined with the desire to put the other down. What we must do in these cases is help them have an adequate self-esteem. (Rodríguez, 2021).

- Be a close role model for them.
- Set limits and rules.
- Show unconditional love and affection for them.
- Teach them to do something new
- Help them set goals
- Highlight their strengths. Don't hesitate to praise their achievements...properly. Recognize even the effort and attitude, even when the desired result has not been achieved.
- Accept as normal that they make their own mistakes, because even these are learning experiences.
- Correct bad actions without putting negative labels on them.
- Don't compare them with others.
- Don't talk negatively about them, especially not in front of them.
- Accept them as they are. Don't create such high expectations that perhaps you yourself couldn't achieve
- Create trust and space for you to listen to what they have to say about what they feel, want, etc.
- Support them so that they can assume new responsibilities.

D. By nature, they are gossipy and very critical of others.

Gossiping is talking indiscreetly or maliciously about a person or their affairs. They tend to spread rumors to harm third parties. The Bible tells us about gossip:

"A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret"
(Proverbs 11:13)

"Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips"
(Proverbs 4:24)

"Whoever would foster love covers over an offense, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends" (Proverbs 17:9)

The Institute for Wesleyan Studies (2022), states:

*To gossip is to use our words in an incorrect way. If the person is suffering something bad, it's better to use our mouth to comfort and support. And if the person is wrong, let's talk to confront him directly in a spirit of love and restoration. **But gossip is just the opposite: it's done behind the back, and it doesn't help at all.** ... gossip is an essential element for a church full of Pharisees, instead of spiritual nurses.*

In another quote, John Sotil (n.d.), mentions that toxic gossips:

They promote discord and cause hatred between neighbors and relatives, and are the cause of the worst evils. The evil that this class of people can do is incalculable. They ignite quarrels between relatives and neighbors, and sow indisposition between brothers and sisters in the faith, spouses, co-workers, pastors, relatives and friends... gossip affects the opinion of the accused and influences social behavior towards the person who is the target of the rumor.

Natalie Carley (2014) takes an interesting look at what we should do when we learn of other people's faults. Based on the passage in Genesis 9:18, 20-27

Shem and Japheth could have ignored their brother's news (regarding their father's nakedness), but they went out of their way to do even more. They took responsibility for covering their father's nudity, to protect him, so that no one else would see his nudity. ..., By covering his nakedness, Shem and Japheth imitated God, who covered Adam and Eve's nakedness with skins (more suitable for covering than the leaves they themselves had used). Noah's first two sons, instead of leaving their father vulnerable and exposed, covered his nakedness, and for that God blessed them.

How did they cover him? Walking backwards, with the cloak around their shoulders. ... They strove, taking precautions to save their eyesight, not to do the same as Cam. This event gives us a beautiful picture of how our attitude should be towards the failures of others. Consider nudity as a metaphor for the shame of sin. Instead of publishing and adding to their father's embarrassment, Noah's older sons covered him. Instead of just ignoring the report that others tell us, we should do everything we can to cover the nakedness, that is, the shame or failure of others and protect their reputation.

The Institute for Wesleyan Studies (2022) reminds us, from the perspective of John Wesley, how to deal with gossip:

- 1^o We must ask God to help us divest ourselves of our spiritual arrogance. The mere fact of being aware that we have also committed sin and only by his grace have we been forgiven, should lead us to be less prone to judge and defame others.
- 2^o We must stay away from gossipers (and gossip). When someone talks about a person who isn't present, we should say, "Sorry, since that person isn't present, I prefer not to talk or listen to information about them." Wesley summed it up in a rule as simple as it is powerful: don't talk about someone in their absence.
- 3^o If I learn that someone is in the process of being reprimanded or disciplined in the church, I shouldn't ask too many questions. We don't need to know the details to have them in prayer for healing and holiness.

Another practical rule of how to avoid falling into the game of toxic gossips is found in the so-called *Three Filters of Socrates* (Andreoli, 2016). The fable says the following:

A disciple arrived very agitated at the house of Socrates and began to speak in this way:

"Teacher! I want to tell you how a friend of yours was talking about you with malevolence..."

Socrates interrupted him saying: "Wait! Have you already passed what you're going to tell me through the Three Filters? The first filter is Truth. Have you already carefully examined whether what you want to tell me is true in all its points?"

"No... I heard some neighbors say it..."

"But at least you will have made it go through the second filter, which is kindness: Is what you want to tell me at least good?"

"No, not really... on the contrary..."

"Oh!" Socrates interrupted. "Then we go to the last filter. Do you need to tell me that?"

"To be honest, no.... It isn't necessary."

"Then, the wise man smiled, **if it isn't true, good, or necessary... let's bury it in oblivion...**"

If you're a gossip, you must confess that you delight in telling the secrets of others. Confess your lack of love for your neighbor and your lack of love for the reputation of Christ and his church, both of which depend on unity. Repent and apologize for it. Try not to listen to gossip by changing your circle of friends, interrupting the gossiper, or walking away from the conversation (Carley, 2014).

E. They always want to be right.

They're very proud people. Proverbs 16:18 says: "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall." They are often arrogant and pushy. They think they know everything and often feel superior to others.

F. They tend to judge others.

Even without having the necessary elements, they often make negative judgments about other people.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted (Luke 18:10-14).

11.2.3 What can we do for toxic people?

Among the actions we can do for toxic people are:

- **Don't repay evil for evil (1 Peter 3:9-11).** The Bible teaches us that we should do good to everyone, even those who try to harm us.
- **Pray for them.** Let's look at them with love and compassion, as people who need the love of Christ and the love of other people. Ask God to change the heart of the toxic person. In Him there is hope and healing.
- **We must not replicate toxic emotions.** The apostle Paul teaches us, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:21). If we respond in the same way to toxic people, we're becoming one of them. The problem is that we can start in a focused way with one person, but the toxicity will end up affecting our other relationships, starting with our relationship with God.
- **Ask God for patience and wisdom** to try as much as possible to be of help to these people. We must remember that God has given us his grace, even though we don't deserve it. We may be the instrument that God uses to bring his grace to that person. Let's ask for the direction of the Holy Spirit at all times when dealing with these types of people.
- **Don't give in to them.** We must take care not to be subdued by people of this type, because their toxicity will end up causing us great damage.
- **Confront them with a true attitude of love.** The spirit in which we speak is the spirit in which we'll be received.
- **Don't let their attitude or mood infect you.**
- **Invite them to talk with an expert counselor to deal with the problem of toxicity** if you don't feel you have the necessary resources to help them out of their problem.
- **If they aren't willing to change, put limits on them.** If after some time, we have seen that the person isn't willing to change and mature, we may have to distance ourselves from them in order to continue growing ourselves.

In Got Question (n.d.) we find the following comment:

We have been called to peace (Colossians 3:15), yet a toxic relationship destroys peace. Some people are so abusive that they don't allow us to seek or negotiate peace in any way. When the relationship is continually fraught with unnecessary drama, when you fear the next fight, when you can't believe anything this person says, or when someone is destroying your reputation and peace of mind, then it's time to create distance in the relationship.

11.3 Conclusions

We must consider that behind toxic behaviors there is a person who is suffering from their lack of emotional development: fears, frustrations, shortcomings, traumatic experiences... They are a person who urgently needs the grace of God in their life.

We have ways to detect if the other person is toxic:

- 1) by the way he behaves and
- 2) by the emotions that he produces in us.

If the toxic person isn't our spouse, children or parents, we have the option to distance ourselves or set limits on the toxic person. If it's a close relative, we have the option of encouraging them to consult with a person (pastor, counselor, etc.) who can help them.

My commitment to God.

Reflection exercises and practical application.

Make an analysis of the negative behaviors that we have studied. Do you recognize any of them in your life? Talk to your spouse about it, but be tolerant of criticism.

Harmful behavior	To what degree do I have it?	What can I do to overcome it?
Talking about bad things in the past		
Self-centeredness		
Lack of tact and empathy		
Sharing gossip and rumors about others.		
Believing that one is always right		
Judging others		

Read the passage from 1 Samuel 125:1-38. Then note in these verses the characteristics and actions of each of the following characters. If the characteristic or action is positive, denote it with (+) and if it's negative, use (-).

Nabal Abigail David Nabal's Servant

Then describe in your own words who the toxic person is, what they were about to provoke. Also describe the person or people who had healthy relationships and what they caused as a result. Also describe David's initial reaction to a toxic person and explain what led him to change.

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Lesson 12. **Avoiding *Toxic Relationships* Part III**

Bible text *Ephesians 4:31*

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

Objectives:

- Identify behaviors that damage our relationships.
 - Recognize those harmful behaviors that are present in our relationships.
 - Take the necessary measures to eliminate those behaviors that damage our relationships, with God's help.
-

12.1 Introduction

Toxic people (*Biblical Reflections*, n.d.) are self-centered and narcissistic, people with malice in their hearts, envious and living for themselves. They think only of themselves.

In *Biblical Reflections*, they point out that toxic people "do not mind trampling on those around them, damaging and hurting with words or even physical acts to take advantage of any situation they are experiencing."

Unfortunately, we can find toxic people anywhere, as expressed by Bernardo Stamateas (2009):

- In places of work, where it could be the boss or co-workers.
- In the extended family, which includes cousins, in-laws, cousins, etc.
- At home, with the spouse, children or siblings.
- In the Church where there may be brothers and sisters in the faith like this.
- Between friends.
- In the neighborhood, where we may have neighbors who complain, gossip or bother us for no reason.
- And perhaps in front of the mirror, if we exercise self-criticism, we may recognize in ourselves some personality trait that produces harmful relationships.

12.2 Development

12.2.1 Characteristics of toxic people

In previous lessons, we have already studied some characteristics of toxic people:

- They provoke unpleasant emotions
- They talk about bad things from the past
- Their relationships are one-sided
- They are self-centered
- They show themselves as victims
- They lack tact and empathy
- They are passive people.
- They spread rumors and criticize others.
- They like to manipulate others
- They always think they are right.
- They are envious
- They tend to judge others.

Now we'll proceed to analyze other characteristics of toxic people.

A. They complain about most things.

They complain about what they have apparently not been able to do, although sometimes they haven't even tried. As much as one tries, it will never be possible to please them. In Mexico, we say that they are people who "are always looking for hair in the soup." That is, they'll always look for anything to complain about. For example, if you invite him to a restaurant, they'll go out of their way to look for something wrong with the food, the service, or the prices. That will not allow you to enjoy the outing that you scheduled to have a great evening.

B. They are very pessimistic or negative.

They have a negative attitude permanently. Everything seems wrong to them, or they find something wrong with anything. Pessimism can show itself in various ways:

- Lack of will to live
- Complaining about everything
- Showing mistrust of other people
- Expressing pity for themselves
- They suspect that others are plotting against them.
- Their perspective is always defeatist, thinking that it isn't worth doing something because everything is going to go wrong.

It's a propensity to believe Satan's lies rather than God's truth; They believe that the good will last very little, that there are bad streaks. It constitutes a contagious state of mind that reflects a fixed idea: every situation is hopeless. This negative mentality cannot contribute anything constructive to the life of the community (Christian Life, 2012).

We must recognize then that pessimism:

- Does not facilitate an encounter with God
- Reveals a lack of trust in God. "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God*" (Phil. 4:6)
- It can lead you to fall into depression, falling into despondency and unhappiness.

The opposite of pessimism is optimism. There are several reasons to be optimistic:

- God has good plans for us. (Jeremiah 9:11)
- We can turn to God in the midst of our need. "Do not be afraid, because more are those who are with us than those who are with them"
- On the journey of grace, we count on others, beginning with the family. (John 13:35)
- God is a God of hope. (Romans 15:13).

If you want to help them, you can do the following:

- Support in prayer those with pessimistic tendencies: "*Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God*" Psalm 42:5.
- Remind them that many times God uses even the bad for our good. "*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives*" Genesis 50:20
- Avoid being "contaminated" by pessimism or negativism. Show them the way they are behaving. Help them give thanks to God always and for everything (Ephesians 5:20; 1 Thessalonians 5:18).
- Invite them to ask the Lord to heal their heart and renew their understanding so that they can think good, positive thoughts inspired by Him.
- Reverse the trend and make positive comments. Just as the perspective of seeing everything from the pessimistic side is learned, after praying and asking for God's help, the person can begin to transform their pessimism into optimism.

We can use the following metaphor to help our relative, friend or acquaintance who has this type of behavior. The metaphor is called "The cow looks up".

One day John Wesley was walking with a very worried man, who seemed to doubt the goodness of God.

"I don't know what I will do with all these worries and fears," he said.

At that moment Wesley noticed a cow looking over a stone wall at them. "Do you know why that cow is looking over the wall?" Wesley asked.

"No," answered his friend, disturbed.

"I will tell you. It's because it can't see through it."

That is what to do with the "wall" of fears. Look higher, above it. Faith helps us to look beyond, above difficulties, to the Lord who is our help. Faith and trust in God is the solution for those who experience pessimism.

C. They like to make drama out of everything.

They like to keep the attention on themselves. "They are a constant tangle of excuses, lies, inventions and absurd situations with which they tire out everyone around them" (*Got questions*, n.d.). They are always facing problems. Once they leave one, they look for

"another problem" that allows them to be the center of attention. Unfortunately, if you offer them help, they won't accept it because then the drama would end.

D. They are born saboteurs.

Instead of being cheerleaders, they always tend to be fatalistic. Giving their opinions on everything, you can hear them saying "I bet that relationship isn't going to work." "Soon they're going to leave", "That professional career isn't for you", "That business that you want to start isn't good, you're going to fail", etc.

E. They don't exercise self-criticism.

It's very difficult for them to accept their own mistakes, so it's difficult for them to admit that they've made a mistake in something.

F. They're unhappy.

Julia Maxima (2019) points out that they act in this way because deep down they're truly unhappy, although they show another external face in front of others. They get frustrated easily. Not being happy, they don't want to see others happy either.

G. Lack of life goals.

They are carried away by the inertia of events. They don't make plans about their work, their life, etc. In the end, they'll always have the opportunity to play the role of victim.

12.2.2 How can we help a toxic person?

Francisco Pastor (n.d.) and Assul García (n.d.) mention some ways to help a toxic person. They can be used with anyone, and especially between spouses:

- Although their behavior hurts you, ***try to understand their situation*** and don't remain superficial.
- ***Don't give in to their manipulations.*** Don't play their games but maintain your autonomy and your convictions. To do this, you must develop assertiveness. Understanding them doesn't mean giving in to their strategies in order to not change.
- ***Trigger your empathy.*** Tell him how their behavior makes you feel and how they hurt you or others. You need to honestly explain the repercussions of their actions or words so that you get release, limit their toxic behavior, and be in a better position to help.
- ***Show them what the problem is.*** Look for the right moment to address the issue and explain how their behavior is a consequence of this or that emotional or personal situation that they need to handle more assertively.
- ***Set limits*** as necessary to stop harmful relationships.
- ***Propose alternatives to their behavior.*** Are there people you admire who behave differently and are doing well? Show them as examples.
- ***Reflect about the benefits*** they'll get by changing their way of being.
- ***Encourages change.*** Change is difficult; if the person makes the effort, support them in moments of weakness, but without falling into condescension.

In addition to this, you can also help each other by considering:

- **Ask for help** to overcome the problems caused by toxic relationships.
- Remember that **love and forgiveness are essential in** healthy relationships.
- Don't forget to **wear the glasses of grace** in your relationships.

12.2.3 What should I do if I am toxic?

María Dolores Mas (n.d.) shares with us some measures that we can use if there are any characteristics of the profile of people that produces toxic relationships. Let's see some of them:

After these three lessons, reflect on whether you have identified if there is toxicity in your life, and have assumed your responsibility to change. The Word says:

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:22-24)

Realizing our reality and acknowledging it will help us see where we are on the Journey of Grace. We may discover that we are indeed saved, but we still need to develop the Fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

Therefore, you must consider if you have some of the necessary resources to change. Think about the following

- **Patience**
- **Tolerance**
- **Assertiveness**, which we studied in a lesson 9.
- **Empathy**, that we touched on a few points in this lesson. If you wish, you can consult the Manual for Happily Married 2021 where the subject is further developed.

We have to start making that change in our lives, we have to pray to our Heavenly Father to help us change and leave that old nature behind. In this process, progress depends on:

- The transforming work of the Holy Spirit
- The development of social skills that you're willing to develop.

Analyze the personality that you have been developing throughout life. The personality of each one is the result of experiences (positive and negative), the education received, the family environment in which we grew up, the habits developed. It also influences the way we handle emotions, which can then give rise to our feelings.

If you consider it necessary, don't be afraid to ask for support from your pastor and a counselor capable of helping you overcome any situation that's hindering your growth, and with it, possibly that of your family.

Be sensitive to the observations made by other people (and more so when they are those of your close family), friends, brothers and sisters in faith, etc., regarding the characteristics they observe in you regarding the profile of toxic people.

Along with this, learn to exercise self-criticism. This will help you recognize the problems that certain behaviors may be causing in your relationships. They'll also be the starting point to recognize that there's a problem in you, if this is the case.

Learn to be flexible with yourself and with others. Develop the ability to resolve conflicts.

For your own health and that of your family, learn to recognize people who produce toxic relationships and, if possible, keep the necessary distance from them.

12.3 Conclusions

It's important to recognize that if we have problems and if it's us who are causing toxic relationships. If so, it's time to remember that we aren't alone on the Journey of Grace. First, there's the Holy Spirit, with his transforming grace. But we have also learned that we rely on the help of others on this journey.

The family must be the first source of accompaniment, without neglecting the pastor, brothers and sisters in faith, and close friends.

My commitment to God.

Reflection exercises and practical application.

1. We suggest doing the exercise of answering some Tests regarding whether we're toxic people. Here are some Links to access them. Then write down the conclusions and what you should do about them.

<https://www.truity.com/test/toxic-traits-personality-quiz>

<https://www.healthshots.com/quiz/are-you-brave-enough-to-find-out-if-youre-a-toxic-person-then-take-this-quiz/>

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2. Do an analysis of the negative behaviors that we've studied. Do you recognize any of them in your life? Talk to your spouse about it, but be tolerant of criticism.

Harmful behavior	How much do I have?	What can I do to overcome it?
Constantly complaining		
Very pessimistic and negative		
Making a drama about everything		
Sabotaging other people		
Tot exercising self-criticism.		
End up being unhappy.		

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