

Welcome

Let's start with a relationship question: How do you know when to be kind, to press deeper into a relationship, or to step back, draw a healthy boundary and set some limits on a toxic person? If only people came with red or green lights on our foreheads or something, a visible sign they're a safe person to press into a relationship with, or someone it's wiser to keep at arm's length.

It's a deep, important question, so hopefully it won't surprise you that we're not the first to ask it. A famous thought experiment called "The Prisoner's Dilemma" was created to explore this question. Imagine you and another person are thrown in prison. You're both facing 2 year sentences in solitary confinement. But the DA makes a deal with you: rat on your friend, and you go free... unless they also rat on you.

So now there're three possibilities: neither of you rats, and you both do 2 years. One of you rats on the other, which means the rat goes free and the other person does 3 years instead of 2. Or you both rat on each other and both do 3 years.

What would you do? Are you a trusting person? Do you put your faith in that other prisoner, that they won't rat you out? Or do you rat them out and hope you go free?

I'm not going to bore you with all the math, but I'll tell you it gets more complicated the more the experiment begins to resemble real relationships. What if instead of a sentence, it's getting food for the day, and you have a chance every day to snitch or keep silent? Are you the kind of person who never rats, no matter what the other person does? (We all know people in relationships like that, right? Who let people walk all over them.) Are you a person who always rats? (We know that person too - someone who's only after their own best interests.)

It might surprise you to learn that some of the best minds in history have set about tackling this problem - how do we live in relationship with people who are unpredictable? - and they have reached conclusions that are strikingly similar to the model of healthy, holy human relationships we find in the Scriptures.

Relationships are messy, complicated and confusing. There are no easy answers. But when we are willing to try, to put in the work, to take seriously how God calls us to live together, we can find the people with whom God calls us to be in meaningful, holy, life-giving relationships.

Message

We're asking in the wake of Easter how God's faithfulness to us changes our relationships. After all, relationships are the heart of faith. Jesus calls us into a relationship with him *and* with each other. God's continuing faithfulness to us enables us to be faithful to each other - to be together through thick and thin. Then we looked at a practice that flows from faithfulness - the practice of making space for quality time with the people God calls us to be in relationship with. Next, we explored the commitment to accept each other for who we are, not expecting the other to change, but rather celebrate how our

differences make us better together, and followed that with an exploration of healthy boundaries. Then we explored Unconditional Positive Regard - a grace-filled gift we give when we choose to assume others are trying their best. That led us to talk last week about how to solve problems together - a practice that requires us to see each other as part of the same family, on the same team.

Today, then, we need to make a painful but important observation: not everyone is safe for us to enter into those relationships with. How many of us have had the experience of being taken advantage of by someone else? We give and give and give, show up in their time of need, only to find that, when it's our turn, they're nowhere to be found.

We've all that superficial friendship we thought was strong, one that had the potential to become something deeper and more authentic. So we step out, share some more of our authentic self, only to receive judgment and condemnation. "I can't believe you really think that!" or "There's no way you'd vote for them," or "I could never respect someone who does that."

The reality is that not everyone is ready or capable of pursuing an authentic relationship. And for any relationship to thrive, it requires reciprocity - both people committing to deepening the friendship, the romance, the teamwork that makes the dreamwork.

So how can we tell if it's wise to press into an authentic relationship with that other person?

First, it's wise to ask whether I'm the problem (always wise to begin with ourselves, since that's the only person we have any real authority over!) There are two extremes that keep us from truly reciprocal relationships. One is our own selfishness. When we're not getting our relational needs met, we have a tendency to demand more - more time, more attention, more.

The irony for us here is that in relationships, acting more needy and selfish doesn't get us what we want. We end up becoming the person people avoid, the person known for always taking and never giving. But we were created in the image of a God who is a giver. We are most ourselves when we give, when we share of our resources, when we put others ahead of ourselves. It's counterintuitive, but often the best antidote to feeling alone, abandoned or ignored is to focus on others.

Of course the other end of the spectrum is what happens when that gets out of hand. We're givers. We do and do and do for others and we never worry about whether our relationships are reciprocal. This can be a form of manipulation as well - we are so desperate for love that we let people take advantage of us and call it friendship or love. But when we're alone with our thoughts, we know the truth: our deep relational needs aren't truly being met. No one likes to be taken advantage of.

Some of us need to give more. Others need to draw better boundaries. There's no rulebook for this, but the closest we have is Jesus' famous Golden Rule he offers in the sermon on the Mount:

Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. -- Matthew 7:12

You want others to be generous toward you? Be generous to them. The inverse is true too. No one else is going to respect your boundaries if *you* don't establish them.

But still: I can be as kind, as generous, as like Jesus as possible, and that still doesn't mean someone else will be. How do we, in this mess, complicated world, live open, kind and generous lives that still have healthy, holy boundaries?

That brings us back to the Prisoner's Dilemma. This problem is so vital, so essential, that philosophers and political scientists have been working with it for decades - a recent estimate concluded that over 2,000 formal papers have been written on it. Back in 1984, political scientist Robert Axelrod published a book called *The Evolution of Cooperation* where he did a bunch of complicated math on the Prisoner's Dilemma to come up with an answer to that question: how do we have success in this complicated world we live in?

You might fear that Axelrod's answer was "just be selfish all the time." If you always look out for yourself first, surely you'll come out on top. But that's not what he found; it turns out that - as Scripture warns - selfishness in relationships doesn't lead to health and flourishing *even for just me*.

Axelrod found four characteristics of successful strategies - what we could reasonably call people who are open, kind and not taken advantage of.

First is **Nice** - in the Prisoner's Dilemma, it means you don't betray the other person before they betray you. You always act in good faith toward the other person. In our relationships in the real world, this is our Unconditional Positive Regard - we charitably assume the other person is as open to an authentic relationship as we are.

The second is what Axelrod calls **Retaliating**. In the Dilemma, it means if the other person chooses to betray you, then the next day, you betray them. In the real world, this is a bit more complicated, in part because retaliation isn't the way of Jesus. What this *is* is a call to draw healthy boundaries. If you put yourself out there and someone betrays your trust, draw a boundary with that person. Confront them about what they did, and don't let them get away with it. Be *kind*, always kind. But draw that boundary.

The next is probably the most surprising and most Christian: a winning strategy has to be **Forgiving**. In the Dilemma, this means successful players don't continue to punish a person to betrayed them. Rather, if the other person reforms, they immediately stop and start helping them again. In the real world, this means we're a people of second chances (and thirds, and fourths and fifths). We understand change is hard, and we have grace for people who are trying their best (UPR, remember!)

[Scripture Slide] I don't think there's a better illustration of what forgiveness looks like in the real world than Jesus' confrontation with Peter after the resurrection. Turn with me to John 21.

You'll recall that when Jesus was arrested, Peter had the chance to speak up for Jesus at his trial; instead, he denied he even knew Jesus. Not once, but three times.

John 21 tells us a story from after Jesus was raised from the dead. Peter and some of the other disciples are out fishing - they've returned to their old lives. Jesus shows up on the beach and makes them breakfast, which is a double treat to say the least.

What I find fascinating about this story is that this isn't the first time Peter's seen Jesus. Peter has had other chances to apologize to Jesus, to ask his forgiveness for betraying him, for turning his back on their friendship. But apparently, he hasn't done that.

You have those relationships, where people just prefer not to mention it every again and move past IT? But that's not forgiveness. Watch what Jesus does with Peter here:

After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"
"Yes, Lord," Peter replied, "you know I love you."
"Then feed my lambs," Jesus told him.

Jesus repeated the question: "Simon son of John, do you love me?"
"Yes, Lord," Peter said, "you know I love you."
"Then take care of my sheep," Jesus said.

A third time he asked him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"
Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Then feed my sheep... Jesus said this to let him know by what kind of death he would glorify God. Then Jesus told him, "Follow me." -- John 21:15-19

Jesus names Peter's sin, but not in a harsh or cruel way. Peter figured out exactly what Jesus was doing - that's why he was hurt. And Jesus' naming of Peter's sin gives Peter the chance to reaffirm their relationship. Their exchange ends with Jesus reminding Peter of how their relationship began - with a "Follow me."

Jesus shows us how to draw healthy boundaries - he didn't just let Peter get away with his sin. Jesus also shows us what kind, loving forgiveness looks like. He didn't rub Peter's nose in it, and was quick to focus on the future of their relationship.

If we want to have healthy, holy relationships, we have to be quick to forgive.

The last characteristic of success in relationships, according to Axlerod, is that we must be **Non-envious**. In the Dilemma, this means we don't mind if the other person benefits more than me. In the real world,

that means we recognize we don't live in a zero-sum universe. I'm not worried about whether you've paid me back or if everything's even. I don't sweat it if you've got more than me, or if it seems like right now, you've got the better of things. Because I'm not trying to beat you. Relationships aren't a zero-sum game. The goal isn't for ME to win, it's for US to win.

"Success" doesn't look like me coming out on top, in other words. Success looks like all of us flourishing together.

Here's what I love about the Prisoner's Dilemma when it comes to relationships: this isn't a theological exercise. The people exploring how to be in healthy relationships are philosophers and political scientists. But the answers they come up with when they drill down on what exactly makes for Good Relationships point us back to the truth that God created us to be in relationship with each other. The principles people like Axelrod arrive at echo what we find in the Scriptures.

Friends, that's because we were created to be in relationships. God hardwired it into our DNA. And we miss that. We forget. We get selfish. Or we let someone take advantage of us. We settle for less than who we are.

But God calls us again and again to return to who we were created to be: humans, fully alive because we are in relationship with God and with each other.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus didn't try to win. He gave us what we need to be in relationship with him.

1. What relationships in my life are mutually affirming?
2. What relationships is God calling me to make changes in?
3. How can I be faithful in my relationships this week?

Assignment + Blessing