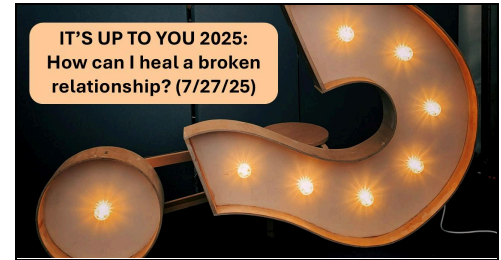


It's Up to You 2025 (Week 5) - How can I heal a broken relationship?

### Yesterday's Sermon Summary



1. Our question yesterday was, "How can I fix or heal a broken relationship?" In 2022, 70% of American adults said that they had at least one unhealthy relationship that they needed to end...so it's a good bet that most of us have a broken relationship or two in our lives.
2. Perhaps the relationship in question broke slowly over time? Drs. John and Julie Gottman, the gold standard among marriage researchers in America, have discovered what they call "the four horsemen of the apocalypse" that kill relationships over time: a) criticism (which is not the same thing as a complaint), b) defensiveness, c) contempt (in which you feel morally superior to the other party), and d) stonewalling (where you retreat behind your walls and stop communicating).
3. But perhaps the break happened quickly all at once? Maybe it was a massive breach of trust? Or how someone caused you great shame or embarrassment? Or accumulating anger finally exploded, vaporizing any relationship that you had with the person?
4. As Christians, our "first principle" (the truth that is our foundation from which we build all else) is that God is most fundamentally love, that God who is love loves us, that we respond to God's love with love, and that we are to love each other because God loves us ([1st John 4.7-21](#) puts all these interconnected pieces in one place, for example). Jesus said that we are to love even enemies, which surely must include those with whom we have a broken relationship. So how do we act in love to heal a broken relationship?
5. A first act of love would be to do the hard work of forgiving. Anne Lamott, writing as only she can, says, "I went around saying for a long time that I am not one of the Christians who is heavily into forgiveness – that I am one of the other kind. But even though it was funny, and actually true, it started to be too painful to stay that way...In fact, not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die." Many of us give and receive forgiveness a lot less often than the scriptures talk about forgiveness. That is, we experience and live forgiveness too little, not too much, too infrequently and not often enough. And as a result, as Lamott concludes, we are the ones who are poisoned, not the person we won't forgive.
6. To "forgive" in the New Testament is closely related to "grace," both words in Greek are tied to the same root. "Grace" is about giving what isn't deserved. Colossians 3.13 describes Christian forgiveness: "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive others." Charles Williams, a writing colleague of C. S. Lewis in The Inklings, once surmised that there is no word in the English language that elicits more terror than the word "as" in that verse: we are to forgive each other **AS** God forgives us.

7. According to the late Lewis Smedes of Fuller Seminary, one of the great Christian writers about forgiveness in the last 50 years, part of why we struggle to forgive is that we misunderstand it. Forgiving does not mean excusing or accepting bad behavior or the wounds it might cause. Forgiving is not forgetting, because often we can't forget what's been done to us. And forgiving doesn't demand that we reunite with the person or trust them anew *carte blanche*.

8. Often, the work of forgiveness is internal, it is soul work that may never be expressed to anyone else, even the person with whom you have the broken relationship. According to Smedes, to forgive means a) to commit to doing no harm in word or deed as a retaliation for the harm done to you, b) to see the person with whom you have the broken relationship as fully human as you are, instead of making of a caricature of them drawing only from the hurt, and c) wishing and praying for them what you wish and pray for yourself.

9. A second way to put love into practice toward a broken relationship is to invite a "truth-teller" (to use John Ortberg's turn of phrase) into your own processing. In Proverbs, these would be called a wise counselor, someone who helps you see beyond your own point of view ([Prov. 12.15](#)) and who helps you plumb and pull out your own murky feelings on things ([Prov. 20.5](#)). This truth-teller is not merely someone to whom you vent about the broken relationship, because venting in the long run just reinforces how you already feel. Instead, they are someone you trust enough that they can, as therapists say, tell you the last 10%, the 10% of what needs to be said that others might not say to you.

10. A third way to direct Christian love toward a broken relationship is to figure out how you can take the first step. A throughline in the interpersonal teaching of Jesus is that His followers are always supposed to take the initiative and not wait for the other party to do so: we make peace, we don't wait for it to be made ([Matthew 5.9](#)), we seek out those we've offended ([Matthew 5.23-24](#)) or those who have offended us ([Matthew 18.15](#)), and we forgive before we're asked to ([Matthew 6.12](#)). That first step may not be direct conversation or contact with the person from whom we're estranged. Perhaps instead it's a commitment to pray for them for a set time, or to begin the work of forgiving in your own heart, or offering a small, indirect kindness to them.

11. Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend in their book *Safe People* write, "We never really know if the relationship has a chance until we do the right thing over time." Will you be able to fix your broken relationship? I don't know, but it is never too late to seek reconciliation. And you can do that by asking, "What's the next good, loving, and right thing that I can do toward this person, and how can I do it repeatedly?" Sadly, some relationships cannot be healed in the present tense, at least not fully, because you are only half of the equation and the other person may not be ready, or maybe the most loving thing for both parties is to keep a safe, cordial distance given the animosity and distrust. But make no mistake about what God is after - God is trying to reconcile you to all people, including those with whom you have a frayed relationship. And, rest assured, there will come a day when, as *The Declaration of Faith* (1977), section 10.2 states, "the fellowship of human beings with God and each other will be perfected."

## **A Prayer for the Week**

This is the prayer that we used at the end of the sermon yesterday. You might want to weave it into your prayer life this week (and you can change the 1st person plural pronouns to 1st person singular, that is, "we/us" to "I/me").

Adapted from Rev. Susan Mark Landis (Mennonite Mission Network):

Lord God, maybe the hardest thing Your Son asked of us was to love those who don't love us, those who don't deserve our love, and those who have proven themselves to be our enemies.

It's far easier to be like the world around us, where people only love those they like and are only committed to those who are their friends.

Good God, though You have called us to be ambassadors of reconciliation we admit to You that we seem more prone to breaking things, including relationships, than healing them. Jesu came to tear down the walls of hostility that divide us from one another, and we can seem equally intent on rebuilding them as quickly as He can demolish them.

God of all mercy, who loved us when we were Your enemies and who gives us love that we don't deserve, may Your Spirit help us pattern our behaviors, attitudes, thoughts, and feelings after Yours.

Until we can love enemies, heal and not retaliate from the harm done to us, and repair the harm we do to others, we have not come to know and live Christlike love. And only in this kind of love will we, and all people, find Your hope. Teach Your ways, oh Lord, this we pray together in earnest, amen.

## **More for the Week**

- Pray every day this week about a broken relationship in your life. As you do, ask God what love would ask you to do in it. Maybe you'll pray about forgiving, or how to take the first step?
- Talk to a truth-teller in your life about one of your broken relationships.
- Find a way to take a first step toward someone with whom you have a broken relationship, even if it's a small step.
- A nice four page summary of Lewis Smedes' great work on how to forgive others:  
[forgiveness.pdf](#)
- Four great, short devotionals on forgiveness to scatter throughout your week:
  - [As](#)
  - [Forgiving and Forgetting](#)
  - [Too Soon?](#)
  - [Grace to Forgive](#)
- Some insight on the psychology of forgiving:
  - [Agreeing to Terms of Engagement to Repair a Broken Relationship](#)
  - [What It Takes to Fix a Broken Relationship](#)
  - [How to Reset a Broken Relationship](#)