

Why the Bible Never Commands Us To: “Have a Good Relationship”



This article is deliberately provocative in order to challenge some errors in the current evangelical dogma that “relationship is everything”. Please read all the way to the end before calling me a heretic!

It was when I was studying at a Baptist theological college in the early 80’s that I had to do some research on Christian relationships. So I got out my trusty Young’s Concordance and looked up the word “relationship”. To my great surprise it was not to be found in the Bible.

So I searched for marriage and found that it was almost only used for the marriage ceremony as in “the marriage supper of the Lamb”. Along the way I discovered that in Scripture no one is ever commanded to “have a good marriage” in precisely those words.

God does not demand, as a matter of obedience, that all our relationships be bright and shiny and perfect. He is way too realistic for that!

We are commanded to love one another, cherish one another, submit to one another, encourage one another, pray for one another, respect one another, and accept one another. There are 23 excellent one-another commands in the New Testament and they do us good!

If we obey these one-another commands we normally should have good souls, good friends and good relationships. However sometimes despite our best efforts relationships refuse to work out, and we should not feel guilty. “Have a good relationship” is a modern human commandment, whereas “love one another” is an ancient command from the eternal God. As we shall see they are utterly different!

Relationships are obviously important to the God who is love. However relationships are not always within our control. And God is just and fair so He does not command us to get a result which we cannot guarantee.

For instance, you can encourage someone and be totally ignored by them while they choose to wallow in self-pity. You can love someone and be abandoned when they run off with someone else. You can lovingly rebuke an alcoholic and see them head down to the liquor store, and you can try and break through to a narcissist but you may never get beyond their utter selfishness.

Relationships and Perceptions of Relationships

Perceptions about relationships differ widely. Someone can think they have a great relationship when the other party thinks it is a terrible relationship. When you counsel them you wonder if they are talking about the same marriage! Others think they have a great relationship with God simply because worship music makes them happy when in fact their life is way out-of-line with His expressed will. Self-deception is common in the area of

relationships. This tendency to view our relationships wrongly means our obedience to the modern commandment to “have a good relationship” is open to huge margins of error.

It is easy to deceive ourselves about “relationship quality” but it is much harder to trick ourselves about how we treat other people. So the ancient biblical commandment “husbands love your wives as Christ loved the Church” is a much tougher call than the rather vague “have a good relationship with your wife”! So the Bible instructs us to focus on our tangible treatment of the other individual (husband, wife, and child) rather than on our subjective perception of how we feel when we are with them. “Give your second shirt to Fred” is very different from “Feel cool and hangout with Fred”.

An Impossible Task

The closest the Bible ever gets to saying “you must have good relationships with everyone” is in Romans, and it is conditional: **Romans 12:18** *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

Note the two conditions: a) if it is possible and b) as far as it depends on you. Paul realized that a few relationships would be “impossible” and that we can only do our best. And the apostle adds the phrase - “as far as it depends on you” - because occasionally the other side of the relationship refuses the invitation to the dance.

In some circumstances “having a good relationship” is a totally impossible task. The person may hate you on religious grounds. They may despise you because you are poor or because you have the wrong politics. Or they may be utterly conceited and see no need of you in their life. Perhaps they may be wrapped up in materialism so that relationships are just not at all important to them.

Many a child has sought a good relationship with their parents in vain and had to “give up” on the quest. Some people get so much power out of withholding love from their children that they play the game all the way to the bitter end. Some people are just self-absorbed, self-pitying, bitter, resentful, hateful and petty. Such people have zero good relationships, with anyone, so it’s not your fault that you cannot get anywhere either.

Even under these conditions we need to be obedient to “one another” commands within the margin of personal safety. We still have to love, encourage and pray for difficult people hoping that the Lord will act and that one day “a good relationship” might emerge. The main exception to this is violent and abusive people, particularly where children are involved.

Focusing on “having a good relationship” with toxic people also sets up us for serious manipulation because if keeping the relationship is everything then we can be conned blind.

Inherently Difficult Relationships

You can still deeply love someone who is quite difficult to relate to such as an autistic child, a loved one in a coma for years, a very introverted strong quiet husband, or a chaotic artist. These relationships are real deep and profound but certainly are not the dazzling rewarding relationships of Hollywood or of the Christian counselling books. They are tough real-world relationships. Many Christians in difficult relationships feel unnecessarily guilty that they are not living up to these painted pictures of Christian perfection. In fact, they may be being more obedient to God’s one-another commands than those in very easy relationships.

Sometimes relationships may be difficult for us because we don't have much capacity for relationship yet, or because we are deeply hurt, physically sick or exhausted, or because we are deeply traumatized, wounded and distrustful from the past. That is no reason for guilt if we are being obedient, and if we are letting Jesus into the process to heal our broken places. God will grow our capacity for love in due time.

Relationships We Should Actually Avoid

When I first read Derek Kidner's excellent commentary on Proverbs I was astonished that he listed 14 kinds of people that God tells us to totally avoid. Up until then I had been in a rather youthful and undiscerning "you must accept everyone" mode. I cannot remember them all but they included: the violent gangster, the prostitute, the immoral woman, the ignorant fool who never listens, the lazy sluggard, the greedy selfish miserly soul, the unfaithful messenger, the flatterer and the gossip, the angry man "lest you learn his ways", the scheming man who purses his lips and points his fingers, the person given to political change and revolution against the King, and the corrupt person full of bribes and dishonesty.

The New Testament adds a few others to avoid such as the idolater, the immoral man who corrupts the Church, false teachers, false apostles, refractory heretics and so on. Some folk are "no-go-zones" until they repent. Of course we can still be polite to them. We can pray for them but we can never be in any sort of close relationship with them. For instance, while Scripture tells us to avoid false teachers, you can politely say "No" to the Jehovah's Witnesses without being hostile.

So if your uncle is a drug dealer and Mafia boss you cannot, biblically, have a good relationship with him. He might be your uncle, he might be fun, but you are to avoid getting entangled in his wicked ways.

In a deeper sense we have to avoid being a "friend of the world" because friendship with the world is enmity with God.

James 4:4 *You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.*

Worldliness has ruined many a good Christian and it often starts with some very marginal and unwise relationships. Proverbs also tells us that we should not have too many relationships, just a few good ones, and that a "man of many friends comes to ruin" (Proverbs 18:24). Even Jesus only had twelve disciples. So we need to prioritize our close relationships and select them wisely.

When the Gospel Gets In the Way Of "Having a Good Relationship"

Sometimes God's call on our life messes up all of our relationships. Jeremiah was told not to marry and also lost all of his family relationships due to his prophetic calling. If indeed, "relationships are everything" then Jeremiah should have kept quiet! Even his family in his priestly home town of Anathoth became treacherous toward him.

Jeremiah 9:4 *Beware of your friends; do not trust your brothers. For every brother is a deceiver, and every friend a slanderer.*

Jeremiah 11:21-23 *Therefore this is what the LORD says about the men of Anathoth who are seeking your life and saying, 'Do not prophesy in the name of the LORD or you will die by our hands'-- (22) therefore this is what the LORD Almighty says: 'I will punish them.*

Of course, we find Jesus warning His disciples about times of treachery and betrayal on account of their faith in Him:

Matthew 10:17-22 *Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. (18) On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. (19) But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, (20) for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. (21) Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. (22) All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.*

Some of our relationships will suffer when we accept Jesus, or when we decide to get serious with God or pursue His calling. At times we may have to “come out from among them” or suffer the judgment of their sins (Revelation 18:4,5) and we are not to be ensnared, entangled and unequally yoked (2 Corinthians 6:14-18). Sometimes obedience to God comes before “having a good relationship” with those opposed to Him!

Jesus even tells us that he did not come to bring good relationships (peace) but divine division (a sword):

Matthew 10:34-39 ESV *“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. (35) For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. (36) And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. (37) Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. (38) And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. (39) Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

Summary

1. We are to zealously obey the one-another commands, love our neighbor, and pursue peace with all, as far as it depends on us.
2. Peace with others is conditional. It is an optimal goal but may not be a possible goal.
3. The modern human commandment to “have a good relationship” is not explicitly found in Scripture.
4. Focusing on relationship quality can lead to self-deception whereas focusing on treating others well is much more reliable and biblical.
5. If we focus on “having a good relationship” as a top priority we can be manipulated and badly hurt.
6. If we love others diligently and the relationship does not work out we have not disobeyed God. We have done our caring best but we cannot control someone else’s response.
7. A few relationships can be impossible especially with toxic people such as a narcissist.
8. Relationships may be difficult for us. That is completely OK. We do not have to live up to some artificial standard of Christian perfection in our relationships, rather we just need to do our obedient best.
9. God tells us to avoid, flee from or even end certain unholy or worldly relationships.
10. The gospel can cause deep division and people may hate us simply because we follow Christ.
11. Obedience to God has priority over relationship with others if there is ever a conflict.
12. Aiming at “good relationships” can lead to deception and compromise whereas aiming at loving, faithful obedience and care of others will keep us on track with God.