

## CHRISTLIKENESS IN RELATIONSHIPS

by  
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**Theme:** Building an atmosphere of Christlikeness—love, respect, beauty in relationships—in our relationships at home and in society.

**Theme Text:** Matthew 5:48

**Presentation Notes:** Throughout the following outline, numbers in parentheses (1), (2), (3) will indicate items from the section called *Sermon Illumination* which may be used for illustration. The addition of your personal illustration will enhance the presentation.

The text for our consideration is one which we have often heard. Its simple message hides a depth of meaning that challenges the greatest intellect. What does it mean to be perfect, like God and Jesus? Perhaps most Christians think of this text in connection with being free from sin. We have probably heard preachers explain that being perfect is being sinless. Surely this must be one of the important dimensions of perfection. Could there be others as well?

This command (or is it an invitation?) of Jesus is found in the Bible record of the Sermon on the Mount. Before saying these words Jesus had talked about righteousness (Matt. 5:17-20); about the spirit of true commandment-keeping (Matt. 5:21-30); about sinful thoughts; and about loving our enemies instead of taking revenge on those who wrong us. It is in connection with these ideas that Jesus calls for His followers to be perfect like their Father in heaven is perfect.

### **More Than the Absence of Sin**

We may conclude then that perfection deals with more than just the absence of sin. It also includes a correctness and beauty in attitudes and actions. Two people might play the same piece of music on the piano. One, who is beginning to learn how to play, may carefully play all the right notes yet we would not say that the music is perfect. The second player, an accomplished artist, will play the same notes but with a touch that brings a new dimension to the sound, and we respond enthusiastically because the music was perfect.

### **Doing the Right Thing in the Most Beautiful Way**

Similarly, in the normal activities of everyday life perfection involves more than just avoiding mistakes. It can also mean doing the right thing in the most beautiful way. For instance, it is right for parents to discipline their children. But there are poor ways of disciplining children and there are beautiful ways of doing it. Married people should speak to each other. But there are inappropriate ways of speaking to a marriage partner just as there are beautiful ways of doing so. (1) When Jesus invites us to be perfect I believe He is calling us to much more than the absence of doing wrong. Instead He is challenging us to demonstrate the art of perfection in all that we are and do.

Ellen White reminds us that "higher than the highest human thought can reach is God's ideal for His children. Godliness—godlikeness —is the goal to be reached" (*Education*, p. 18). Suppose a friend of yours has a twin brother whom you have never met. You try to imagine what this twin brother is like. Then your friend says: "Why, he is just like me." Can we think of Godlikeness, or Christlikeness, in that way? Can you imagine Jesus describing you to the angels and saying, "Oh, that person, he/she is just like Me." What a magnificent tribute that would be.

I believe it is the Christian's privilege to develop the likeness of Jesus. In our meditation today we shall look at Christlikeness in human relationships—the way we think about and treat each other in families and in society. The hard part of Christian leadership in the home is how to be successful in working with people, in building an atmosphere of love, respect, and beauty in relationships. How easily two people can disagree over an incident or an idea. The matter that sparked the disagreement is insignificant—but the disagreement isn't. Words and actions are misunderstood. Feelings are disturbed. Tension heightens. Suspicion discolors viewpoints. Barriers come between. The life spirit is broken.

In our roles of correcting, advising, encouraging, counseling, supporting, and sometimes confronting, we are admonished to keep in mind the goal of Christlikeness. What can we learn from our Lord and His dealings with us? Perhaps the following points can be of some help to guide our thinking:

- He expresses constant good will toward us.
- He does not treat us as we deserve.
- He takes the initiative to bridge the distance between us.
- He forgives us readily.
- He knows our weaknesses and our strengths.
- He is committed to loving us.

### **Characteristics of Jesus**

Let us briefly consider each of these beautiful characteristics of Jesus.

**Constant good will toward us.** God holds people in high regard. He is attached to us by a stubborn love that will not let go. The Bible uses captivating word pictures to describe His commitment to us: "As a father has compassion on his children . . ." (Ps. 103:13); "As a hen gathers her chicks under her wings . . ." (Matt. 23:37); ". . . shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye" (Deut. 32:10); "You did not choose Me, but I chose you . . ." (John 15:16).

Every person has a high value in God's eyes regardless of talents or the lack of them. Our measurements of human worth—beauty, brains, wealth—are not the instruments God uses to determine our value to Him. He loves us regardless of what we are in human terms. (2) *We are not loved because we are worth much. But we are worth much because we are loved.*

So often human love is expressed with conditions attached. We say "I love you," but we often mean "I love you if you are always good," or "I love you when you treat me nicely," or "I love you because you get good grades in your schoolwork." But God does not attach conditions to His love for us. He says "I love you" and His love is not dependent on what we do or say to Him. See Romans 8:35-38.

**Doesn't treat us as we deserve.** Most Christians have a firmly held opinion about the absolute justice of God. And justice means, sooner or later, that wrong is punished and right is rewarded. In this troubled world it is sometimes comforting to think that all human behavior is weighed in an unerring balance and dealt with according to merits or deficiencies. But is this a correct picture of God?

"He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities . . . As far as the east is from the west so far has he removed our transgression from us . . . He knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust . . ." (Psalm 103:8-14) .

It may be a great injustice to Him if we view God as the cold, impartial, unfeeling judge of human conduct. It may be more correct to say that God makes mistakes, consistently—on the side of mercy. We would all cease to exist if justice were applied. In His dealing with our weaknesses God is not trying to get even with us.

When discipline and standards need to be enforced in our homes it would be well to remember not only the Golden Rule but also the way that God deals with His erring children. Someone observed that a child can endure any amount of discipline as long as he knows that he is loved. Let us remember that His discipline is with a view to our development, not our destruction.

**Takes the initiative to re-establish harmony.** It is a natural human tendency to maintain the distance between ourselves and those who have hurt us. We leave it to the other person to take the first step in removing a barrier. But God is not like that. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

The plan of redemption is not an afterthought. Nor is it a response to mankind's helplessness. It is not the intervention of a reluctant God finally answering the desperate plea of doomed humanity. The story of salvation is not about a lost person seeking God, but about God seeking and finding lost people. Someone described the Scriptures in these terms: The Old Testament is a record of humanity seeking God, the New Testament is a record of God seeking humanity. The stories of Luke 15 (the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost boy) are powerful illustrations of God doing everything He possibly can to restore harmony.

Incidentally, this is a basic argument in favor of active witnessing and evangelism. There are some who feel we should adopt a more passive witness. We must remember that God took the initiative in the divine rescue of a lost world. Today His ambassadors must find their place as partners in that divine initiative.

Christlikeness calls for us to take initiatives too. When relationships are broken, let us take the first steps to repair them. When people suffer, let us be about the business of rescue. "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" (Isaiah 58:6, 7).

**Forgives us readily.** A sinner does not need to beg forgiveness from God. It is His desire to forgive. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive . . . and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Forgiveness is a gem in human nature just as it is one of the most beautiful attributes of God. Forgiveness enables us to rewrite history. The forgiveness of God is so complete that we become, in His sight, as though we had never sinned.

Does forgiveness become less valuable because of the ease with which God dispenses it? If we readily and quickly forgive, do we lessen the weight of wrong and thus encourage more of it? No! The one who experiences forgiveness knows its power to immunize against repeated offense.

Recall the story of the woman who anointed the feet of Jesus. (See Luke 7:36-43.) Evidence suggests that this woman was Mary Magdalene who had experienced the forgiveness of Jesus in a most remarkable way. (3)

**Knows our weaknesses.** One of the contributions of the Roman Empire to modern civil law is the concept of equality. It is often distorted to convey the idea of equal punishment or equal reward. Equality, however, is not an arbitrary thing determined by some policy or code book.

Circumstances differ, people are not always the same. A parent may discipline one child by the use of words. Discipline, to have the same effect on another child, may have to be physical.

In His dealings with us God takes into consideration the uniqueness of our own background and individuality. He knows where (and when) we were born. He knows our frailties. He does not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able to bear. He shapes His treatment to fit the situation and the individual. His policy book is not an inflexible document.

**Committed to loving us.** One of the dominant characteristics of God revealed in Scripture is that He has bound Himself to us by an oath and a covenant. God has made up His mind about us. He is not waiting to decide whether or not we qualify for His blessings. Ellen G. White observes that in the gift of Jesus to this world God has identified Himself with us by ties that are never to be broken. It is our appreciation of His constant and steadfast love that motivates the spiritual life.

Love within a family grows best in an atmosphere of mutual commitment. Isn't that really what the marriage vows represent, a commitment to love even when there are obstacles and challenges to continued love? "I take you to be my lawfully wedded spouse, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow."

Someday there might be vows that we can take as parents. Vows which we would express, over and over, to our children so they will be surrounded by an atmosphere of warmth and acceptance. Vows that will make our homes a haven of refuge where our children will always feel safe and cherished. That is the way God deals with us.

It may seem, at first glance, that these characteristics of His dealings with us present Jesus as a weak and yielding God. However, the more we consider these elements of His relationship to us, the more we shall come to appreciate His commitment to us. From Him we learn the principles of conduct, of human value and of restoration. Being perfect is not just refraining from sin. If that were so, we would all be perfect in our sleep.

Perfection is the godlikeness that can be demonstrated in our words, attitudes, and behaviors toward one another. Jesus Christ our Lord is the pattern for our lives. Through appreciation of His ways with us we will grow to be like Him in our earthly relationships.

## Sermon Illumination

**One (1):** A story that comes from Jewish literature tells of a Rabbi who sent his servant to the local market to buy something good. The servant returned with a package of tongue. The Rabbi next sent his servant to the market to buy something bad. The servant returned, again with a package of tongue.

The Rabbi sternly questioned the behavior of his servant. Why should he bring the same item when what the Rabbi wanted was something to contrast between good and bad.

The servant replied that when tongue (speech) is good there is nothing better, but when tongue (speech) is bad there is nothing worse.

**Two (2):** Many years ago, while we were holding pastoral responsibilities in northern Canada, my wife demonstrated some loving care to an elderly member of the church. She prepared special meals which we then took to his house. She washed the dishes and cleaned the house on many occasions. After the man died we discovered that he had written a small note in his will to say that

the kitchen stool in his house should be given to my wife. It was a homemade stool, a thing for practical use, and really not worth much. In each of our subsequent moves, in Canada and overseas, I felt that we should sell the stool because it wasn't worth much and could easily be replaced.

However, my wife has steadfastly refused to permit the sale of that stool. Its value to her cannot be measured in terms of money. She insists on keeping it, not because we need it but because she loves it. For a long time I could not agree with or understand my wife's views about that old piece of handiwork. Gradually I have come to learn that it was her love, not its usefulness, that gave the stool its amazing value. I think that this is the way God looks at us.

**Three (3):** Corrie Ten Boom, one of the heroes of World War II, assisted many Jewish people in their escape from the dangers of arrest, and possibly being killed. She and her sister were caught and detained in the infamous prison camps. Corrie's sister did not survive the prison camp experience. Corrie did, however, and following the war she traveled extensively to urge a spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness among all peoples.

After one of her meetings, in which she spoke about the beauty of God forgiving us and the need for us to forgive one another, she stood at the church entrance to greet people as they left the meeting. Among those who came past her was a man she recognized to be one of the prison guards who had so violently mistreated the prison camp inmates. He now reached out his hand to greet her. Corrie was frozen with resentment, and could not speak, or shake the man's hand. She silently prayed, and suddenly felt the warmth of forgiveness flow into her heart. After a brief silence she clasped the man's hand and exclaimed, "Isn't forgiveness beautiful."

## References

White, Ellen G. (1952). *Education*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association.