

## Relationships Series Intro

Our guide for faith and life is the Bible. And when it comes to the subject of this series on relationships, the Bible has a lot to say. But sometimes, to understand what the Bible is telling us about how to live, we need to work hard to figure out how our thinking has been shaped and how it needs to change. So, this series may sound at times like it's based on things other than the Bible, but let me assure you that the principles I will be teaching are from Scripture.

The reason I'm telling you this right off the bat will become obvious in a moment as I analyze the relationships in the Christmas song, "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer". Are you ready for this? The season is officially over, but the melodies linger on . . .

*Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer had a very shiny nose  
And if you ever saw it, you would even say it glows*

Rudolph is different. He stands out from the crowd. What typically happens to the person who stands out from the crowd? They get picked on:

*All of the other reindeer used to laugh and call him names  
They never let poor Rudolph join in any reindeer games*

So a reindeer with a red nose, much like a human with a bright red nose, is singled out as an object for mockery, for emotional abuse. He is excluded from the circles where other reindeer find their community and, to a large degree, their identity. This happens to humans as well. Those who are different are singled out and very often excluded from having a part in the community that would give them a sense of well-being, a sense of belonging, a community that would help them to know who they are. So Rudolph is excluded from reindeer games because he is different and is deprived of the chance to find his identity in community.

But, things change, and we're led to believe that it is for the better. Listen to this:

*Then one foggy Christmas Eve, Santa came to say  
Rudolph with your nose so bright  
Would you guide my sleigh tonight?*

Rudolph's liability, the thing that set him apart as being different, that kept him out of community, is now an asset!

*Then how all the reindeer loved him  
As they shouted out with glee  
Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer  
You'll go down in history*

Not only does the liability become an asset, but being despised is transformed in an instant to "being loved" and Rudolph is not only accepted but is idolized. On what basis? On the basis of being able to do something that is needed by others. The message is: if you're useful, you are worthy of love. If you're just different, you deserve to be mocked and ostracized. Thanks to Johnny Marks, who wrote the song in 1939

based on the marketing strategy of Montgomery Ward Department Stores, we can sing this tale of performance-based love every year, and always remind ourselves that it is what we do that makes us deserving of others' love and approval.

Now, I know I'm reading too much into a silly song about a fictional reindeer, but notice that there is no blame attached or criticism offered to the eight reindeer who participated in the shunning of poor Rudolph. That's just what happens to creatures that are different from the rest, and there's no reason to go after them for doing what any others would do. In other words, the expected thing is that those who are different will be excluded and those that offer something that people want, will be accepted and even honored. The about-face of Dasher and Dancer and company doesn't even raise an eyebrow.

Now, let's look at how Rudolph and his fickle friends can shed some light on the world we interact with each day.

1. People are "loved", which really means 'admired' or 'approved of' in the song, when they can do something well. Who are the most admired people, the most looked-up to people in our culture? Actors and actresses can do something really well - it's called pretending to be someone they are not. And they are admired, they win approval from the world, for this skill. And then there are athletes, most of whom are paid very well for doing something they would do for free on their spare time anyway. We "love" them, or at least we cheer madly, when they score the goal or the touchdown or win the medal for our country that we wanted them to win. People who are skilled in ways that help others also tend to have high approval ratings: doctors, nurses, veterinarians, dentists and farmers all received a rating of over 90% in Canada during an Angus Reid public opinion poll in 2012. Also rating highly on such polls are firefighters, police officers, paramedics and military personnel, while at the opposite end of the scale are journalists and politicians -- interesting how those two dominate during the run-up to an election. Others that rate low in Canada are telemarketers, lawyers, used car salesmen, bloggers and CEOs.
2. The second thing we want to assess about our culture is the idea that someone who is 'different' can be ridiculed or bullied. I was reading the results of a study from 1999 at UBC which said that 51% of Canadian teens had had a negative experience on social media. A 2010 research project in the Toronto area reported a similar percentage. Another study shows an increase in fighting since 2002. Boys are more likely to experience physical aggression and girls are more likely to be subject to cyberbullying. There were no studies undertaken on how many red-nosed reindeer experience bullying, but in the "different" category, young people with a non-heterosexual orientation are three times more likely to be bullied than straight kids. The effects of bullying are also well known and include a greater risk of suicide, poor marks in school, headaches, stomach problems, depression and anxiety. Also, according to one study, 60% of boys who frequently bullied others in elementary school had criminal records by age 24.
3. The more subtle observation, but also very important, is that it's okay to treat other people in an aggressive and judgmental way. Just as the reindeer in the song were mean and hurtful towards the one who didn't fit in, and no words appear in judgment

of their attitude, so today many people feel that their words of judgment and anger and rejection are okay because they are just expressing their opinion. How do they arrive at this conclusion? Because the world, feeding regularly on the lies of Satan, convinces us that it's very important for us to express our true feelings, that we are not being true to ourselves if we keep things in, that we are not emotionally honest or healthy if we don't tell the truth all the time. There is nothing biblical or Christlike about this conclusion, but it is held by so many as some kind of sacrosanct law that we must obey or it will result in bad things happening to our inner person. This is not an accurate portrayal of the teaching of Scripture, nor is it a healthy or helpful way to live one's life. Let's look into it.

We'll start with Proverbs because this book has a lot to say about our speech, which is one of the first ways in which we reveal what is in our heart:

*He who guards his mouth and his tongue  
Keeps himself from calamity (Prov. 21:23)*

And this next one, from Proverbs 17:28:

*Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent  
And discerning if he holds his tongue.*

And another:

*Reckless words pierce like a sword  
But the tongue of the wise brings healing (12:18)*

You will not stunt your emotional health if you learn to keep quiet, especially when the things you were about to spill from your heart to your lips and out into the place from which they cannot be retrieved, are hurtful and not spoken out of love or respect. "Reckless words pierce like a sword" - that reminds us that our words have incredible potential to do harm to someone. And sometimes we just don't care because we are hurt or angry about something that the other person has done. But look at the benefits of thinking before talking ... and perhaps choosing not to say a thing: you may keep yourself from disaster, you may be thought to be wise, and you may bring healing. One more bit of wisdom from the book of Proverbs:

*When words are many, sin is not absent  
But he who holds his tongue is wise (10:19)*

Where I see this self-expression as most dangerous is in the areas of anger and judgment. I know of one situation where one partner in a relationship feels a need to speak their mind, to criticize and to judge their partner whenever something comes up that they have an opinion about, or a feeling about. What that does to the partner is trigger anxiety and fear, distraction at work and deep hurt and uncertainty about whether the relationship itself is worth the cost. Why do we do this to each other? Why do we feel we need to express every little frustration or disappointment? Why do we need to communicate every unmet expectation? Typically, it is because we have a love deficit; we can't or won't look at things from another's point of view.

At 12 years old I was a fan of the Beatles and I still remember the time, April 1964, when they had the top five songs on the hit parade. But, even as a fan, I laugh at the lyrics to one of their later hit songs, entitled “We can Work it Out”:

*Try to see it my way  
Do I have to keep on talking till I can't go on  
While you see it your way  
Run the risk of knowing that our love may soon be gone  
We can work it out, we can work it out*

*Think of what you're saying  
You can get it wrong and still you think that it's alright  
Think of what I'm saying  
We can work it out and get it straight or say goodnight  
We can work it out, we can work it out*

The idea of working things out is a nice one, but notice the conditions for success: you have to see things my way. If you do, there's a chance that we can still be friends, but if you don't, there's not much hope for our relationship. A few years later, they found that they couldn't work it out and the band broke up and for years there were hard feelings and accusations about what led to the breakup.

The bottom line was that not everyone could have their own way, particularly between the two main forces in the group, Lennon & McCartney, and so they said goodnight.

The tragedy in relationships is not that they are difficult or that they challenge our pride and self-reliance or that they require that we don't get our own way and aren't happy about it ... the challenge is that so few people are willing to really love another person. It seems more typical that we “pursue” another person at whatever level of relationship we're looking for, in order to gain something for ourself.

And when we achieve the goal, the other person falls short of our expectations and the criticism begins, at first just within our thoughts, then in our conversations with the person and, ultimately, with anyone who will listen. It may be a marriage relationship, a business partnership, a friendship at work or with a neighbor, a restart with a long-lost friend from school. Or, it may be the beginning of a relationship with someone else who goes to the same church you do. Are you in it to learn to love that person as best you can, to offer what you're able in terms of friendship and respect, or is there a need within yourself that, when it's not met, will turn you against that person, and lead you to speak against them?

Back to our words, this time from the New Testament:

*And I tell you this, that you must give an account on judgment day of every idle word you speak. The words you say now reflect your fate then; either you will be justified by them or you will be condemned. (Matt. 12:36,37)*

Oh, Jesus, I didn't want that. I didn't want to hear that at all. I love to hear about forgiveness for everything I've ever done wrong and about being your child forever, but I don't want to give an account of what I've said to people ... every word? What about the

things I said when I was angry because I didn't get what I wanted out of an argument? What about the things I said about that other person when I was feeling jealous or when they seemed to be ignoring me? And as we think about Jesus' words we're embarrassed at how self-centered and unloving we really are ... and that someday we'll have to admit it. What we should do is admit it now, walk humbly in relationship with God and others, and try to learn this thing called love. If all we're doing is trying to hide our insecurities and fears and pride and anger ... we won't move forward in maturity.

One more text, and it's a big one. I'll read it slowly and let's try to digest what James says about our talk:

*The tongue is a flame of fire. It is full of wickedness that can ruin your whole life. It can turn the entire course of your life into a blazing flame of destruction for it is set on fire by hell itself. (James 2:6)*

*Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father and sometimes it breaks out into curses against those who have been made in the image of God. And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right! (James 2:9,10)*

The tongue is full of wickedness and can ruin your life. Do you believe that? I do. I've seen it. I've seen people who have to express every anger and resentment they feel. I've known people who have an opinion about everything and always want to correct you when you speak. I've come across situations where people feel a need to express little tidbits of gossip, things that damage others' perception of a person. And these people will always feel like others don't like them or don't trust them or don't share easily with them and they will blame it on someone else or tell you that they're just being honest. But the real problem is that they refuse to control their own tongue. They refuse to take the long hard look in the mirror and do that thing the Bible talks about again and again: repent. Repent means you acknowledge that you have something to feel sorry about, something you've done, and then to change, to turn around and to start living a new way.

James also says that there is something not right about speaking words of praise to God and then turning around to curse someone made in God's image. Who is made in the image of God? Surely not that person at work who is making life difficult for everyone around him or her! Yes, that's the one! "But when I look at that person I don't see anything that reminds me of God." That's not the point. The point is not that people deny what they have been created to be or live in opposition to God's purposes. The point is that we need to see others the way God sees them, to see the potential that He has created within them and to speak and act in ways that encourage that potential. Instead, too often, we speak words of condemnation and hopelessness. It's not always the other person that needs to change first - sometimes it's us - but we can change.

We started off today with poor Rudolph being excluded and mocked by his peers and with the fact that his peers suffer no rebuke, no correction for the manner in which they bully the red-nosed reindeer. That may be a picture of the world, but it's not a picture that has any credibility in heaven. Scripture teaches us that our words are important,

that they can ruin our lives, that they will be judged, and that wisdom would teach us to exercise restraint in the things we say. If you're married, you may want to hold on to your criticism of your spouse and pray blessing instead. If you're in a difficult relationship in your extended family or at work, you will find that it's better for you, spiritually and relationally, to hold back your opinions and try to see why God would still have hope for this other person.

Relationships are what make life interesting and rewarding. They fill our cups with the security of good friendships and heart connections. They often bring us laughter, encouragement and support with the many challenges life brings us. They are key to the experience of joy and satisfaction. But they're not easy. As we go through this series, we'll be looking at how to do relationships right and it won't have anything to do with taking the easy way out -- but we will grow!