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Restoring Our Relationships

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First Episcopal District Bible Study

The Year of **RESTORATION**

Key Verse:

"...Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...Love your neighbor as yourself"

[Matthew 22:37-39]

Study Passage:

Judges 11:1-11; 29-39

THE RECKONING

Our social relationships are in trouble. Many of them are unstable, weak, violent, and the source of great stress, pain and sorrow.

For many, the first experience with unstable relationships begins at home. African-American children experience nearly twice as many family transitions—the break up of one partnership and the forming of another—as white children.¹ In 2014, twenty-two percent of black children were living with parents in their first marriage, 9% with parents in remarriage, 7% with parents living together, and 54% with a single parent.²

Children go to school to learn about the world and form friendships, and many go to school and learn about pain. In 2016, one out of every five students reports being bullied.

Among high school students, 15.5% are cyberbullied, 20.2% are bullied in school. Among middle school students, 24% are cyberbullied, while 45% are bullied in school.³

We grow up with hopes of finding lasting love. However, while the majority of black people will get married sometime in their lives, the majority of those marriages do not last. In 2016, only 29% of

African-American adults were married.⁴

Whether married or not, our romantic relationships are often sources of violence and abuse. One in three American adolescents is a victim of physical, sexual, emotional or verbal abuse from a dating partner.⁵ One in three women, and one in four men in the US has been the victim of some form of physical vio-



THE RECKONING *(continued)*

lence by an intimate partner in their lifetime.⁶ Seventy percent of women worldwide will experience physical and/or sexual abuse by an intimate partner in their lifetime.⁷

Across all of our relationships, whether family or not, romantic or not, Americans are reporting having fewer close friends – people they could depend on to help them in tough times, listen sympathetically no matter what, lend them money, give them a place to stay if they needed it, or keep a secret if they shared it. Despite being more connected than ever before through social media and having hundreds of Facebook friends, in 2011, people reported having an average of only two close friends—down from an average of three in 1985. The researcher who conducted this study contends that Americans are not more socially isolated than they were in the past, having fewer relationships. Instead, he argues, it is the nature of our relationships that is changing. We trust people less.⁸

Our lives are like frayed ropes struggling to hold on when the threads of the relationships that weave us together, and make us who we are, break and fail to support us.

Sources:

1. Institute for Family Studies: <https://ifstudies.org/blog/race-cohabitation-and-childrens-family-stability>
2. Pew Research Center: <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/17/1-the-american-family-today/>
3. National Bullying Prevention Center: <http://www.pacer.org/bullying/resources/stats.asp>
4. BlackDemographics.Com: <http://blackdemographics.com/households/marriage-in-black-america/>
5. LovelsRespect.Org: <http://www.loveisrespect.org/resources/dating-violence-statistics/>
6. National Coalition Against Domestic Violence: <https://ncadv.org/statistics>
7. Huffington Post: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/23/domestic-violence-statistics_n_5959776.html
8. Live Science: <https://www.livescience.com/16879-close-friends-decrease-today.html>

RECLAMATION

God restores the threads of our weak and broken relationships as we engage in the intricate weave of loving God, loving other people, and loving ourselves.



RECOVERY

The book of Judges tells the story of the Israelites after the death of Joshua and before the rise of Samuel, the prophet who anoints Israel's first king, Saul. During this period, Israel was ruled by judges. These individuals were not simply judicial leaders, however, but were rulers in the fullest sense, often with significant military roles. Throughout the book of Judges, the author, who is unknown, delineates a repeated cycle in which the Israelites "do evil in the sight of the Lord," fall into the hands of oppressors, are delivered from the oppressors by God who empowers the judge, and experience a temporary period of peace until they "do evil in the sight of the Lord" again.

The judge of our study passage, Jephthah, ruled Israel for six years. While the Israelites experienced military victories under Jephthah's administration, Jephthah's inability to deal with past hurts and damaged relationships caused him to make a series of bad decisions with deadly consequences.



JUDGES 11:1-11; 29-40

11 Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead; his mother was a prostitute.² Gilead's wife also bore him sons, and when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away. "You are not going to get any inheritance in our family," they said, "because you are the son of another woman."³ So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a gang of scoundrels gathered around him and followed him.

⁴ Some time later, when the Ammonites were fighting against Israel,⁵ the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob.⁶ "Come," they said, "be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites."

⁷ Jephthah said to them, "Didn't you hate me and drive me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now, when you're in trouble?"

⁸ The elders of Gilead said to him, "Nevertheless, we are turning to you now; come with us to fight the Ammonites, and you will be head over all of us who live in Gilead."

⁹ Jephthah answered, "Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the Lord gives them to me—will I really be your head?"

¹⁰ The elders of Gilead replied, "The Lord is our witness; we will certainly do as you say."¹¹ So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them. And he repeated all his words before the Lord in Mizpah.

²⁹ Then the Spirit of the Lord came on Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites.³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands,³¹ whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

³² Then Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into his hands.³³ He devastated twenty towns from Aroer to the vicinity of Minnith, as far as Abel Keramim. Thus Israel subdued Ammon.

³⁴ When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter.³⁵ When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, "Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break."

³⁶ "My father," she replied, "you have given your word to the Lord. Do to me just as you promised, now that the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites.³⁷ But grant me this one request," she said. "Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry."

³⁸ "You may go," he said. And he let her go for two months. She and her friends went into the hills and wept because she would never marry.³⁹ After the two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin.

RECONSTRUCTION OF JEPHTHAH'S RELATIONSHIPS

1. Identify the five groups of people with whom Jephthah has relationships. (Hint: one group is a group of one). How would you characterize these relationships? To what extent are they strong or weak? Life-giving or sources of pain?
2. How would you characterize Jephthah's relationship with God? Was there two-way communication? Why did Jephthah make his vow when the Spirit of the Lord was already upon him? What did he believe about God that would lead him to sacrifice his daughter's life?

RECONSTRUCTION

OF JEPHTHAH'S LOVE

In our key verse, Jesus says that the greatest commandment of all is to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves. Let us see how Jephthah's broken relationships and failure to love God, himself and others led to one bad decision after another:

1. Identify the types of pain and emotional scars Jephthah likely experienced from his family of origin. Does Jephthah attempt to love himself and heal from these wounds?
2. In v. 3, Jephthah starts hanging out with a "gang of scoundrels." What led him to choose these people as his friends? Was he loving them genuinely? Was he using them to fill an emotional void? Both?
3. In vv. 4-10, the elders ask Jephthah to be their commander, and he boldly calls them out for their past actions. Why does he let them off the hook without making them respond to his concerns or offering an apology? By allowing this, was he loving the elders? Was he loving himself?
4. When Jephthah sacrificed his daughter, was he demonstrating love for God, himself and/or his daughter?



RENEWAL

The ropes of our relational lives as Christians are made of three threads – love for God, love for other people, and love for ourselves. Whenever a love relationship in one area is weak, all other areas are weakened. When we fail to love God, we are disconnected from the Source of our love for others and ourselves. When we fail to love other people, we are out of sync with our God-given purpose to give and receive love. When we fail to love ourselves, the sacrifice depletes our ability to love God and others.

God restores our broken relational ropes when we weave all three threads of love together and develop the skills to L.O.V.E. well:

LISTEN

- **To GOD.** Include silent meditation in your prayer life. Listen for God’s messages of love and guidance.
- **To OTHERS.** Try to understand what others are saying—without interrupting, defending yourself, or planning your next comment.
- **To YOURSELF.** Pay attention to your emotions and your body. They affect the things you do and say and have a lot to teach you about who you are.

OWN UP

- **To THE PAST.** Things that happened in the past affect you now. God can heal the hurts and break the cycles of the past, but only if you face them.
- **To YOUR LIMITS.** We are not perfect. We grow stronger when we admit that we are wrong, that we don’t know, that we have hurt others.

VALUE

- **YOURSELF.** Your needs and feelings are important.
- **OTHERS.** Others’ perspectives, contributions, needs and feelings are important.
- **GOD’S PRINCIPLES.** The quality of your love matters!

ENGAGE

- **IN GOOD TIMES AND BAD TIMES.** Don’t avoid conflict and difficult conversations. Fight fair, but fight.



REVIVAL

1. How well have you been weaving the threads of love in your life? Can you identify weak threads that are negatively affecting your relationships?
2. Think about the relationships in your life that need to be restored. Are there specific L.O.V.E. skills that you could put to use to restore those relationships?
3. Are there L.O.V.E. skills that you find challenging? What changes do you need to make to develop those skills and exercise them more consistently?



NOTES:
