

PASTOR'S NOTES. CONTROL vs. RELATIONSHIP, Part 3

*Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.*

*When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' "*

*So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate."*

Luke 15:11-24

We know this story as the parable of the prodigal son, but I bring it up here to focus on the behavior of the father. Most Christians reading this parable have thought of God in the position of the father, and the rest of us either fitting the role of the prodigal son or the other brother. But the image of God could be disturbing. This father is willing to give into to his son on just about everything, and welcomes him back even before the son has made an apology or any evidence that he has learned. This father appears to be kind of a push-over on the one hand, allowing his one son to get away with his whims, while the other son dutifully lives according to the rules. On the other hand, we could also fault the father with doing too little to get the son back when he is gone and clearly suffering. We don't know from the story if the father made any efforts at locating his son; possibly he could have been doing a lot behind the scenes, maybe even helping to get the son his job with the pigs. But it is also possible that he just sat back at home, occasionally looking down the road to see if his son might come home today, but doing little else (perhaps not able to do much else). In either way, from the son's point of view, the father is absent.

Contrast this with the words of Jesus in another place:

*"So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him..."*

Matthew 5:23-25a

Notice the wording “your brother or sister has something against you.” Not that *you* have a problem in your heart (which you should still take care of), but that you find out that *they* have a problem with *you*. Often we wouldn’t even know this is the case. But this sounds far more aggressive than the laid-back style of the prodigal’s father. This almost sounds like what we call “codependent”: when a person is psychologically dependent on another in an unhealthy way. There must be times when it is right to “shake the dust off your feet” and leave (Matthew 10:14, Luke 9:5, 10:11).

My take on these two passages is that they are not as far apart as they may seem. I suspect that the prodigal’s father did make an effort to try to help his son (without letting the son know about it). I suspect also that the person trying to repair the relationship in Matthew 5 also understood that there is only so much they can do, and in the end they might have to just let the other be.

This is important because I believe ultimately our relationships with each other work best when we balance the two: accepting each other as we are, not because we are okay with where they are in life, but because we realize that any changes in life have to come from within, and it could take decades for people to realize this. At the same time, we do whatever we can to improve our relationship with them and help improve their relationship with God.

When I was younger, I had more of a salesman mentality. I thought about how people around me were unhappy; I thought about how some were clearly headed for destruction and Hell. I was also aware of the truth that this moment I have with them could be the last moment we get together. So I wanted to tell them everything I knew (and even though I don’t know that much, that’s still longer than any of my sermons), fix every problem in their life, and get them to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. After all, either of us could die later today; we might never get another chance. But I realized that this doesn’t work, for many reasons:

- 1) even if they agreed it was good advice, there is only so much any of us can process at one time (even Jesus says at one point, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now”- John 16:12);
- 2) even if they mouth the right words about accepting Christ as their Lord and Savior, only He knows the heart, so I can’t really know if I “closed the sale;” and
- 3) even people who like you do not want you to “fix” them; it makes them feel less than you, it makes them feel like their freedom is threatened, or that your love for them is conditional, and they will naturally be less motivated to follow your advice.

In other words, this approach can actually move many people farther from Christ. And in my efforts to impose control, the relationship is damaged. Now my brother or sister might have something against me, even if they haven’t said so.

So the task for us is to find that balance in our relationships. This is after all what LOVE is: a desire for us to be the best we can be, but a willingness to go to the cross for us regardless. Just a thought.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' written in a cursive, flowing style.