

## Sitting at the Nail-Scarred Feet of Jesus

### Learning to Fight for Steadfast Love in a Culture of Disposable Relationships

By Doug Brown

The way of Jesus is clearly not the way of the world. Yet the way of the world is a powerful force to shape our thinking and behavior. Exhorting us to the Way of Jesus, Paul writes – “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:1-2).

Obviously, Paul thought it necessary for followers of Jesus to consider the reality of their host culture’s power to shape their thinking and behavior. He exhorts us to have our minds renewed by the Word and Way of Jesus so that we think true thoughts leading to righteous behavior. God’s Word is the standard by which we know God’s will and by which we judge everything. Paul also exhorts us to make a very hard and costly decision to surrender our wills to God’s will – to become “living sacrifices.” Paul is calling us to “take up our cross and follow Jesus” (Matthew 16:24) or in his language “crucify our sin nature” (Galatians 5:24). We are naïve if we do not seriously consider that our sin nature, the world, and the devil will fiercely conspire to keep us from doing this.

One of the obvious ways the world forms us to live in its ways is in the arena of our relationships. Our Western culture is marked by radical individualism and disposable relationships. These realities press in on us seeking to tempt us in at least a couple of ways. First, we are tempted to isolate ourselves from close relationships where we will become vulnerable to being disappointed or hurt by others. Given our ability to disappoint and hurt one another, this is inevitable. Second, we are tempted to avoid the very hard and costly work of working through conflict with one another in the Way of Jesus.

Todd Hall expresses our temptations – “When we become disillusioned, the temptation we face is to disengage in various ways: (1) we search for a ‘better’ church community; (2) we stay on the edges of community; or (3) we convince ourselves that we’re better off practicing solo Christianity. These temptations are almost automatic due to our individualistic and consumeristic culture in the Western world. When we disengage from Christian community, it becomes fragmented, and we collectively fail to create a new social order of love and to shine God’s light in the world.”

Paul expresses the Way of Jesus as follows:

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*... so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ... Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Romans 12:5, 9-10*

Contrary to our culture's views, we are bound to one another in God's family through the bond of Jesus the Son. Moreover, we are to honor one another above ourselves. Jon Tyson describes our call to Christian community as "a creative minority ... in a web of *stubbornly loyal relationships* knotted together in a living network of persons who are committed to the Way of Jesus together for the renewal of the world."

As followers of Jesus and people of his Way, we must learn from Jesus how to fight for steadfast love in our relationships with one another. Thankfully, Jesus has both modeled and taught us how to do this, and he is always present with us to empower us to walk with him and one another through what Scott Peck called "the tunnel of chaos."<sup>1</sup>

Before we look more closely at the Way of Jesus and steadfast love, let's consider more closely Paul's exhortation to us. Look closely at the foundational reality upon which Paul exhorts us to do this hard work. He says, "in view of God's mercy..." Stop. Take a deep breath here. As you consider the challenging work of pursuing steadfast love in relational conflict, consider deeply God's mercy to you personally in Jesus Christ. This is literally the foundation of everything we are called to be and do in the Kingdom of God.

Ponder carefully and deeply the means through which God has brought you home to Himself in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of His Son Jesus. Think deeply of what it costs our Savior to rescue us from our sin, Satan and death and to restore us to new life with him in the Kingdom. Ponder slowly the costs of God's steadfast love to you in Jesus. This is the same steadfast love He calls us to embody with one another (John 13:12-17, 34-35). Let's be real about this. The steadfast love of the Lord is very costly. It was to Him, and it is to us.

Take some time to sit at the foot of the cross. In your sanctified imagination, raise your eyes to the nail-scarred feet of Jesus. Listen to him say, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). "In view of God's mercy," ask Him to empower you to walk the Way of our nail-scarred Savior and Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Scott Peck writes about what he calls the stages of community: 1) Pseudo-Community: We pretend we are all alike and suppress any differences or disagreements; 2) Chaos: The tunnel of chaos – we are no longer able to suppress our differences or disagreements; 3) Emptying: We empty ourselves of our egos and false ideas of one another. This must involve forgiveness, grace, acceptance, mercy, honesty, and humility; 4) True Community: We truly know and love one another as we are. We have been through the storms, and we covenanted to one another.

Paul speaks often of the Way of Jesus in the community of our King. Every command here flows from the Way of Jesus with us. Pay close attention to what he says to us.

*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues, put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. Colossians 3:12-15*

*As a prisoner of the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Ephesians 4:1-3*

### **The Way of Jesus in Steadfast Love**

Jesus assumes we will offend and hurt one another, and he models and teaches us his Way of steadfast love. Moreover, he stands ready to share his power with us so that we might have the resources necessary to walk his Way (John 15:4-5; Acts 1:8).

First, Jesus modeled the Way of steadfast love for us. Consider his actions on the night he was betrayed. Knowing his friends will abandon him, what does he do? He washes their feet saying, "Now that I have washed your feet, you should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master ... A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:14-16, 34-35).

From the cross, Jesus prays for those crucifying him saying, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). This is extraordinary given what he has endured at the hands of sinful men.

If we killed God's Son, what would we expect him to do to us? Yet, after Jesus' resurrection, what does he do? We might expect him to scold his disciples who abandoned him. Instead, he calls them "brothers" and greets them with, "Peace be with you" (Matthew 28:10; John 20:26). How does he respond to Peter, who denied him? He forgives him and commissions him back into ministry (John 21:15f).

Second, Jesus teaches us the Way of forgiveness. Forgiveness is included in the way he teaches us to pray (Matthew 6:12; Mark 11:25). He teaches us there is no limit to the times we are commanded to forgive the one who sins against us (Matthew 18:21-22). He tells parables about the reality that the very DNA of the Kingdom is forgiveness (Matthew 18: 21-35). He tells us that

our identity as sons and daughters of the Father is revealed as we seek to live as peacemakers (Matthew 5:9).

Living as peacemakers is not easy or convenient. It is a costly part of taking up our cross and following Jesus. It takes humility to overcome our pride or hurt. It takes courage to walk into “the tunnel of chaos.”

### **Commitments of Peacemaking in the Way of Jesus**

**First, we are to be committed to doing everything we can to work through perceived or real conflict. We honor and love one another by fighting for the relationship.**

*Be devoted to one another in steadfast love. Honor one another above yourselves. ... Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Romans 12:10, 17-18*

Peacemaker Ministries writes – “Instead of accepting premature compromise or allowing relationships to wither, we will actively pursue genuine peace and reconciliation – forgiving others as God, for Christ’s sake, has forgiven us, and seeking just and mutually beneficial solutions to our differences.”

Peacemaking in the Way of Jesus is for the purpose of preserving and protecting our relationships and the greater unity in the community of our King (Ephesians 4:1-6). Regardless of the specific nature of the conflict, we are wise to think and pray about how we may express our love to the person we are planning to approach. We can start by affirming the value of their friendship to us.

If we become aware that a brother or sister has something against us, we are to go quickly to them to be reconciled (Matthew 5:21-24). What if we do not think we have done anything wrong to this person? Jesus commands us to take the initiative to go humbly and gently to work through the perceived issue.

If a brother or sister engages in a minor offense against us, we may simply be able to overlook it. But if a brother or sister sins against us, we take the initiative and go to them (Matthew 18:15-20). Paul picks up Jesus’ teaching when he instructs us to seek to restore our brother or sister gently (Galatians 6:1-2). We honor and love the person by going directly to them rather than talking about them to others.

To be clear, Jesus and Paul are not commanding us to police the morality and behavior of those outside the Kingdom of God and the Church (1 Corinthians 5). Rather, we are called to humbly help our brothers and sisters overcome sin to live as the family, who do the will of God (Matthew 12:46-50).

Also, Jesus says we are to go quickly. In both cases, we are seeking to express to the person how much we value their friendship and our desire to work through it.

It is important that we follow these commands to do this quickly. Why? Notice the context in Matthew 5:21-24 is dealing with our anger. Unchecked anger is destructive to us and to others. Moreover, unchecked anger gives the demonic a way to get into the situation and makes it much worse (Ephesians 4:25-27).

The writer of Hebrews warns us of unchecked anger and unforgiveness spreading beyond us into the web of our relationships. Again, we see that we are to “make every effort to live at peace” meaning we are to seek to be peacemakers like Jesus. To neglect or refuse to do this will likely make things much worse for us and others.

*Make every effort to live at peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. Hebrews 12:14-15*

This is one of the dangers of going to others before we have gone to the person. Anger has a way of poisoning the community around us.

**Second, we go humbly and gently to the other person eager to take responsibility for however we have contributed to the conflict (Matthew 7:1-5; Galatians 6:1-2; 1 John 1:8-10).**

As Peacemakers Ministries says – “Instead of blaming others for a conflict or resisting correction, we will trust in God’s mercy and take responsibility for our own contribution to conflicts – confessing our sins to those we have wronged, asking God to help us change any attitudes or habits that lead to conflict, and seeking to repair any harm we have caused.”

It is wise to approach the person using “I” statements rather than “you” statements. We might start with – “Something has come between us that I need to share with you ... I feel ... when you ... I may have contributed to this problem by ....”

**Third, we do the necessary and hard work of forgiveness (Matthew 5:7; 6:12; 18:21-22; Colossians 3:12-15).**

Remaining in a posture of unforgiveness gives Satan more power to deceive and hurt us and others building a stronghold in our life (Ephesians 4:23). Paul tells us that forgiveness is one of God’s weapons to tear down the defiling work of Satan (2 Corinthians 2:7-11; 10:3-5).

We may briefly summarize the essentials of forgiveness as follows:

- It is a command to us not a suggestion.
- It is a choice to release our anger and desire for vengeance against those who have offended or sinned against us. It is not a feeling.

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- It is our letting go of the “IOU” we are holding onto in our hearts waiting for them to pay us back. It may be helpful to think about the costs of the person’s sin against you. This is the “IOU” your heart is tempted to clutch.
- Forgiveness is empowered by the Holy Spirit as we ask Him for help. Forgiveness may come quickly or slowly requiring us to keep surrendering our wills to Jesus and asking for his help.
- It ultimately means that we are willing to be content that Jesus’ suffering on the cross is sufficient to pay for their sin, so they won’t pay the eternal costs.
- It is finished when we have a heart-posture that allows us to want God’s blessing for those who have sinned against us.
- It is not saying that their sin does not matter (clearly the cross teaches us that sin is very costly).
- It is not saying that the person is trustworthy or that we can enter safely into relationship with them.

***“As yet I am but weak in love, unsure in virtue; that is why I need your support, your comfort. So come to me, come to me often and teach me what is in your holy laws. Set me free from evil passion; heal my heart of all its ill-regulated affections; so that, whole and pure in my inmost being, I may become ready to love, strong to endure suffering, steadfast to persevere.” Thomas a Kempis, The Imitation of Christ***

For a more detailed treatment of the subject of forgiveness, see the practice of forgiveness ([greenwoodcc.com/resources/practices](http://greenwoodcc.com/resources/practices)).

For a more detailed treatment of steadfast love, see the practice of Devoted Love in a Culture of Disconnection ([greenwoodcc.com/resources/practices](http://greenwoodcc.com/resources/practices)).

See Peacemaking Principles – Responding to Conflict Biblically ([peacemakerministries.org](http://peacemakerministries.org)).