

**Our Struggle Within  
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It is good to be with you again for this spiritual growth meeting.

It is an honor and privilege to be here with you.

Last year, I fell in love with the Brethren in Christ church in Japan. I did not think it was possible to feel so much love for people in such a short time. But, God gave me an overwhelming love for you.

This year, I am so excited for you to meet my wife. I want her to also to meet her Japanese brothers and sisters in Jesus. I know she will love you the same as I love you.

Now, can I tell you a secret? Phyllis-San is a little bit nervous about meeting everyone. She is afraid she will not you name or pronounce it correctly and that you might be offended. Will you please forgive both of us when we fail that way. We will give our best effort.

I am aware that you have been working through the Brethren In Christ Core Values. These are very helpful. They help us understand who we are. They help us understand why some things feel very important to us. They help us understand how we fit into the body of Christ. I want to encourage you in your learning.

Did you know that God has core values to?

Think about this with me a little bit.

Jesus told us that the greatest commandment is to: **'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'** Jesus said this is the greatest commandment. God places a very high value on our relationship with Him. He said, "Your relationship with me is the most important thing that you can give yourself to?"

Then He said, <sup>39</sup> **'And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'**

Jesus said, "The second most important thing we can do is give ourselves in relationship with each other."

This is what God values. God values Love; our love for Him and our love for each other.

Now, when our Brethren in Christ Core values are rooted in love (the thing that God values), then our BIC Core Values are very powerful, very helpful.

But, if we are not motivated by love, then our BIC Core Values lose their power.

Does that make sense to you? So, over these next three sessions, I am going to talk to you about developing healthy relationships... healthy relationship with God... healthy relationship in our marriage, in our family and in our church.

If you wanted to see where these talks fit in the BIC Core values, some parts will fit in core value 1 relationship with God. Some will fit in core value 5 – belonging to a community of faith, and some fit in core value 7 – serving compassionately. But all of them fit into God's core value of loving.

Now, we all know that we were created to live in relationships, don't we?

We were created to be in relationship with God and with each other. God designed us to be in relationships.

Let me show you how basic this truth is:

According to Psychology today (A respected medical magazine), **"Babies die when they lack physical affection." But touch is even more vital than this: babies who are not held and nuzzled and hugged enough will literally stop growing and-if the situation lasts long enough, even if they are receiving proper nutrition - they will die."**

God designed us to be in relationships!

If that's true, which it is, why is it that so many of us have such a strong drive toward being independent?

Why is it that some brothers and sisters can't get along?

Why is it that many marriages end in divorce?

Why do neighbors feud?

Why do churches split?

If God designed us for relationships, why are relationships so hard?

During our time together, we are going to try to understand some of the relationship challenges we face. In each session we will look at one of the challenges we face in building healthy relationships. And, while some of the illustrations I'll use have to do with marriage, most of the information that we'll explore is applicable to every relationship that we have, whether at work, at home, in our community or in the church. We want to work at building healthy relationships.

In this session, we want to look at the struggle within us. That is to say, that one of the greatest challenges we face in building healthy relationships is found in each one of us. The difficulty is that we often can't see it, or we refuse to see it.

Allow me to begin to expose the issue. Here's an example, and I've seen it many times. A young couple, or a not so young couple approaches me and says, "We want to get married."

They have stars in their eyes, and they can hardly believe their great fortune in having found this near perfect person that want's to marry them.

As we begin counseling, it quickly becomes evident that they each have an idea of what their marriage will be like, and often those preconceived ideas are as different as night and day. Yet, they each believe that the other person has the same idea of what their marriage will look like as they do.

The preconceived ideas that we hold become the expectations that we have for our relationship. And, every relationship that we enter, we enter with expectations.

Let me give you an example:

When Phyllis and I were dating, closeness was highly valued. I loved it when she was close to me. I would put my arm around her and draw her close, and I just knew she loved it as much as I did. I mean, why wouldn't she like being close. We were in love.

One time when we were walking and I had my arm around her, she said, "this just feels so uncomfortable."

I was shocked and asked, "What do you mean?"

I just knew she liked being close.

She said, "First of all, you are so much taller than me and your stride is so long, I have a hard time keeping up. And second, your arm is heavy – it's uncomfortable."

I was devastated; I thought she liked being close to me. Apparently, I was wrong.

Then she said, "I like it when you hold my hand. Just hold my hand."

For me, closeness had to do with physical proximity. For her, closeness had to do with emotional connection. We could have talked at length about our desires for closeness and never understood that we were talking about two different things.

We can describe our expectations using the same words and, yet, they can be very different. And when our expectations go unmet, it can leave us feeling discontented in the relationship.

The only difference between unmet expectations in marriage relationships and other types of relationships is that in a marriage relationship we tend to feel more committed to working it through. In other relationships, it can be easier to withdraw.

We all have expectations in our relationships, and we may use the same words to describe them, but our expectations can be different as night and day.

Well there's something else that I want us to understand about expectations. Often, we don't even realize what our expectations are until they are unmet. And, when these undefined expectations are not met, if we don't take time to try to understand what the expectation is, that was not met, we can become angry or hurt or annoyed and not even understand why.

Early in our marriage, Phyllis-San and I did voluntary service at our church Youth Camp. We were given a few dollars each month for food, clothes, entertainment, car insurance and car repairs, and any other expenses we might have. It wasn't enough money to cover everything, so we had to be very cautious.

Now, I like challenges, and I like to be organized. So I found it kind of exciting to see how we could make our money stretch.

So each month, as I would balance our checkbook, I would ask Phyllis-San about the checks she had written. Things like: What did we buy here, what did we buy there? Why did we spend so much at the grocery store this month?

Each time I would ask Phyllis-San questions about spending, she would just break down and cry. I'd say, "No, No, No, I'm not angry, and I'm not scolding. I just want to understand where our money went, so that if we need to cut back somewhere we'll know where we can cut back. I felt so bad for making her cry!

This ritual went on for several months; each time, Phyllis in tears and me feeling bad for asking. Until finally, one month, Phyllis said, I understand that your not angry and that I'm not in trouble. Then she said, "I expected you to be angry about my spending and I finally figured out why. I realized that I was taking an experience from my past and transferring it to you. I'm sorry I didn't trust you."

Phyllis-San didn't even know she had that expectation and yet that expectation was impacting our relationship.

Unknown expectations and unmet expectations show up in all kinds of circumstances:

A friend doesn't respond to our text message right away and we begin to become upset. Behind that feeling of upset is an unmet expectation.

A husband or wife come home from work and find their spouse sitting on the couch, the house a wreck, nothing being prepared for dinner, and they begin to get upset. Behind that feeling of upset is an unmet expectation.

Unmet expectations happen in every relationship, and if we are going to build healthy relationships, we must identify what those expectations are, (in other words we must be self-aware), and then we must determine if they are healthy or unhealthy expectations.

Let's talk about the health of expectations:

Expectations all have a root system. They all have a place from which they draw life. Some expectations find their root in family systems. Some expectations find their root in culture. Some find their root in education or in our life experiences. But there is a deeper level, a spiritual level from which they draw life.

To help understand this truth, let's look at Jesus words:

#### **Matthew 16:24-25**

**<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.**

Jesus said, if you want to be my disciple, if you want to be in relationship with me, you must deny yourself and take up your cross and follow. In order to have a relationship with

Jesus, we have to get our selfishness out of the way. That's denying our self. Taking up our cross is dying to self.

Inside each of us there is selfishness, and that selfishness hinders us from being in relationship with Jesus and in being in relationship with everyone else. Selfishness hinders healthy relationships.

Expectations that are rooted in and given life by selfish desires will hinder all of our relationships. Expectations that are given life by selfish desire are always relationally unhealthy.

So, testing the health of our expectations begins by discerning "where they are rooted, and why are they important to us?" Are they rooted in selfishness?

We must determine what our expectations are and where they come from.

The next test of the health of our expectations comes by measuring them against **Philippians 2:3-4**

**Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, <sup>4</sup> not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.**

Does my expectation demonstrate that I value others above myself? Does it demonstrate my concern for their interests?

Asking these two simple questions will help expose where our expectation is rooted, and if it is healthy.

And, if we find that an expectation that is rooted in selfishness, the best response is to put it to death. That is, to choose to deny ourselves and follow Jesus.

Folks, sometimes that old selfishness sneaks back into our lives, and we need to reaffirm that we have died to ourselves and become alive in Jesus. And, that we choose not to follow the ways of selfishness. It's only through Jesus that we can win that battle within us.

But, most times, we'll find that our expectations are reasonable and healthy. And, in these cases, I offer this process for working through unmet expectations.

First, when there is tension in a relationship, Whether at home, at work or at church, wherever the relationship is, we must understand that underneath the tension there are likely unmet expectations.

(Tony called me Smitty)

Second, rather than strike out in frustration or anger, or to withdraw, take time to explore what the expectation is that is unmet.

Third, test your expectation to make certain that it is healthy.

Fourth, if your expectation is healthy, pray about how you approach the person with whom you are struggling relationally.

Fifth, talk to the person, sharing how their words or actions or attitudes are affecting you. If the person is receptive, share about your expectations that were not met.

Sixth, listen and look for common understanding. Be ready to encourage them, and to forgive them.

Relationships take work. And when we understand each other's expectations, we are one step closer to building healthy relationships. But to get there, we must win the battle within, the battle against selfishness, which can only be done through Jesus... (dying to our self and receiving new life through Jesus).