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### **Presentation Transcript**

## **God-Based Marriage, The Organizing Principle 8 – Repairing Ruptured Relationships**

**By Bill Jacobs**

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I was looking this morning at the series we're on – *The God-Based Marriage*. We said in the beginning that we were going to look at the organizing principles of marriage, and that's what we're doing. But it seems that most of the principles we're talking about have everything to do with relationship. And why wouldn't it? Marriage is about a relationship. In a way, though not stated at the outset of this series, the series is about how to create a good relationship in marriage. We've talked about the *Golden Rule*, *Sacrificial Love*, *Being Heirs Together of the Grace of Life*, *Having the Back of Our Mate*, *Emotional Connection* – which is what drives it – and last time, *Marital Communication*. All those are components of relationship. And now we're going to talk about how to repair the relationship when things go awry. So we're calling this *Repairing Ruptured Relationships*. The term *ruptured relationships* comes from attachment theory literature.

So the first thing I want to point out is... I read last time, in the presentation, about marital communication – about couples who had problems communicating. But you may remember that Mary said, "There is no knight." And had Fred been attuned enough to know what she was talking about – but wasn't – he might have replied, "Well, there's no heroine, either." So neither husbands nor wives are perfect. So it's good that Mary understood that, because it's a realistic awareness. They are just two imperfect people who know they long for and need connection. Since God created the institution, we can know that no one has to be perfect for it to work. What a relief! But imperfection in marriage can mean difficulties. If the couple isn't perfectly attuned to the needs of their mate and their own as well, the perfect fulfillment isn't going to happen.

W. Winnicott, a British pediatrician and psychoanalyst, coined a phrase years ago: *the good-enough mother*. And we learn from John Bowlby, the person who started the whole attachment school of thought – which we've relied heavily on through this series – that a parent doesn't have to be perfect at attaching to their baby – just good enough. Babies, it seems, start out needing nearly immediate attention when they develop a need, but it actually helps them, as they mature,

to experience brief bouts of frustration. It teaches them to be resilient. It strengthens their security. The baby learns that mom always comes – sometimes it takes a bit longer. When we grow up, then we have an awareness that this is unrealistic to expect perfection from anyone. And some might think, “Well, that’s okay for small things, like chewing with his mouth open, but what about having an affair?” I have never worked with a couple where an affair was only the fault of one person in the relationship. The affair is usually the result of numerous frustrating interactions between the couple.

So when we work on resolving everyday communications, or we work on having each other’s backs in everyday life, or we work on sacrificial love, we’re really working on the big issue – whatever it is. Most affairs are the culmination of many smaller relational ruptures. So, if we learn how to take care of those, then infidelity, or abuse, or abandonment, for example, are much less likely to be a part of the picture.

What do we do to repair a ruptured relationship? Well, since usually a major rupture builds up over time on the foundation of a number of smaller issues, learning to talk those smaller issues out, using our reflecting model that we’ve been working on, is one way to do that – to tend to the smaller things. Solving problems before they get to be big ones is much easier than dealing with an affair, for example, or a family in an abuse cycle.

Also, instead of just one person having their way all the time, or most of the time, find solutions that work for everybody. That means you have to stop fighting and start cooperating to find a solution to an issue and to get down to what’s causing the issue at all. That, also, is a part of our communications thing that we just worked on. So that’s very important.

Now, there’s one big thing we have not talked about related to repairing relationships. Do you know what it is? Haven’t mentioned it. It’s forgiveness – maybe the biggest thing of all in repairing most ruptures in relationships. Forgiveness, though, is one of the most misunderstood issues in the Bible. Let’s understand it. Let’s clear away some confusion first – some of the misunderstandings.

To some, when they hear the word forgive, they add, “...and forget.” Forgive and forget. Well, it’s not possible to forget. And it wouldn’t be good to forget in many cases. You know, if we burn our hand on a stove when we’re little, we remember to stay away from hot things forever after that. So our memories can guide us through life. You know, there’s that old saying, “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.” We learn from our mistakes – or at least, we’re supposed to. And sometimes we can even learn from the mistakes of others, if we’re attuned to what’s going on around us.

Now let’s think about that in relationship to an affair. Notice a couple things that Jesus said.

**Matthew 19:9** – *And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and*

*marries another, commits adultery."*

So, to some people, this implies that adultery should not be forgiven. And one of the reasons given is often that sexual fidelity is the basis of the marriage relationship, which, if you have been paying attention to this series, it is not. The series is about the marital relationship and we have barely mentioned sex. The emotional connection between a couple is what binds them together. So what part does sex play? Well, it's the glue that holds it together, but it's not the most important part. The *connection* – what's being glued – is more important.

So, to others, it means if something can't forgive adultery, then it's okay with God to divorce. Now look at what Jesus said just before He said this verse. In verse 8, He says:

**V-8** – *He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.*

Does this imply that a person who divorces his or her mate is hard-hearted? Well, He didn't actually say that in every case. For some that I have worked with, I've seen one of them in an ongoing state of promiscuity. So illness could become an issue. And, if it's an ongoing state, it's going to continue, so there's no repentance or commitment to change there. As in the case of abuse, we all have to take care of our temple. We're commanded to do that. So, if there is abuse – physical or to the psyche or the possibility of getting sick – separation, at the least, seems necessary. But then, of course, in our society, separating, but not divorcing, in some cases, leaves the person vulnerable financially to those who are vindictive or financially irresponsible. Though a person may not want to divorce and live in a separated state, your attorney would probably never advise that.

Jesus said something else about this that is critical for our understanding. By the way, I'm not providing any specific answers for anybody – I think of you picked that up by now – because every case is different. I'm just talking about principles. The people involved in the situations are the ones that have to figure how to apply them in their case, based on what they understand Jesus meant by what He said.

So what else did He say? Well, in Matthew 19:10:

**V-10-11** – *The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." He had just said, "Moses allowed people to divorce, but from the beginning that wasn't so. And he only allowed that because of hard-heartedness." And their conclusion was, "Well, it would be better not to get married then." But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. And then He uses this example to explain it. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it."*

What's He talking about? Well, when we go before God, and we promise Him we will live with our mate for the rest of our lives, doing so becomes a kingdom issue. The disciples got it. After they heard what He said, they said, "Maybe it's safer not to get married at all!" And He also said, in general, if we don't forgive everyone we think has wronged us *from our hearts*, we won't be forgiven either. He said that in this parable I'm about to read to you. And this parable is about how and why we are to forgive others. In Matthew 18:23 is where it starts:

**Matthew 18:23-24** – *"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.*

So that's a meaningless figure to us, because we use dollars. Right? So how much is ten thousand talents? Well, at the going rate of servant labor in that day – which would roughly equivalent to minimum wage today, or maybe less – it would take him two hundred years to earn enough to pay his debt. Today, at minimum wage in New Mexico, that amount – of ten thousand talents – would be \$3,744,000 dollars. Now you ask, "How could a servant accrue that much debt?" Well, a lot of times, the reason people become servants is because they owe money. And so their master pays off their debt and they work for them for the rest of their lives, or until their debt is paid. But the point is not any of that. The point is, there was no way he could *ever* pay it back.

Okay, so in the parable, who is the servant and who is the master? Well, God's the Master, right? And we are the servant. So, you know, there's another old saying: (I'm kind of on old sayings today.) You can't unring a bell. We can't undo our sins and we can't unring a past life of sin. So what is Jesus saying to us? He said this in another place: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Back in those days, the Jews thought their salvation was by birthright. And Jesus is saying, "No, everything has changed now. It's *not* by birthright. It's by accepting *Me*" – Christ. "And unless you repent, you will all likewise perish – Jew or Gentile." So this parable, really, is about our relationship with God. And it's about forgiveness.

In verse 25, we'll pick it up again:

**V-25-27** – *And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. That was within his right to do that. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.*

Now think about this with me. Did the master forgive the guy's debt because he promised to pay it? No. He forgave him. He knew it was impossible for him to repay. It doesn't say he gave him a loan so that he could work it off over time. It says he *forgave* the debt. So, at this point in the story, the servant is debt-free! His problems are solved. Right? No more debt. So that means his master is not going to sell him and his children – they'd have to work somebody else then. No,

his debt is paid. He's now free to continue on in his servitude to his master and all is well.

So taking this down to us and God, then, what are we learning? Well, if you follow the analogy, when we sin, we go into debt to God. And when we sin, the debt is our life. We have forfeited it. When people sin, they come under the death penalty. So we're as good as dead. We forfeited our lives when we sin. And through no action of our own, when we fall on God's mercy and beg forgiveness, God cancels our debt, because it's already been paid by Christ at His death. Now, we *do* have to fall on His mercy and follow Him the rest of our lives – be His servants – but there's no past debt that we owe anymore at that time.

Notice what the debt-free servant does.

**V-28-31** – *But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii – which is a tiny amount that couldn't possibly make any difference in that huge debt he owed – and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.*

Why were they distressed? Because what happened wasn't fair and it's wired into people to want justice. And he had an example in his own life of how to deal with people who owe him, but he didn't follow it. Verse 32:

**V-32-34** – *“Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.’”* See, he didn't forgive because he knew he'd pay him back. He forgave him out of mercy and love. *“And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant – who pleaded with you, speaking the very same words you spoke to me, by the way – as I had mercy on you?”* And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt, which meant he was going to be in debt for the rest of his life. He was out of the game.

Now, if we think about it, the servant was presented with two paths. He could go debt free, because of – in our situation – the grace of God, and also forgive everyone who owed him money – also the grace of God who lives in him. Or, he could try, in vain, to pay back the debt and exact justice from all those who owed money to him. So really, there was no reason for him to get upset with those who owed him money. Why? Because he no longer needed the money! When you're a servant, your master provides your food, your housing, your clothing, all your basic needs. He didn't need any money. The only reason he needed money was because he was in debt, and that debt was forgiven. It was cancelled. Verse 35:

**V-35** – *So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother*

*from your heart.*" See that's the whole point of the parable. And it explains *why* we should forgive everyone.

One of the reasons it's hard for us to forgive others is because humans, like God, want to see justice. When we're wronged, we say, "It's not fair." But here is the Christian stance on justice. It's in Romans 12:19.

**Romans 12:19** – *Beloved, avenge not yourselves.... So when we try to avenge ourselves, what we're trying to do is execute justice, aren't we? ...but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

So it's our job to be just and loving – and I say, "To *be* just." I mean to be a good person and loving. And it's God's job to take care of the people that wrong us. And it's His job to take care of us when we have wronged others. And one of the most important life lessons I've ever learned watching my clients is this: as they work through the hurts done to them by others over their lifespan, it becomes much easier to let go of those things. If you're not hurting anymore, it somewhat becomes a non-issue. So also, watching clients learn how to understand each other, using our reflecting model, helps them let go as well. I've seen that.

The kind of communication we teach is closely related to that of the organization Public Conversation. This organization has gone around the world and engaged communities and nations on hot button issues. And they have public discussions about these issues. They went to Ireland and engaged Catholics and Protestants in the kind of communication that I teach couples. They went to the United States and South Africa and had discussions about race issues. And the participants of these discussions report that, while they did not change their own opinions on the issues under discussion, their attitude toward those on the other side of the issue changed. When they understood *why* they believe what they believe. And this same thing happens to couples.

After a communications session, I sometimes ask each of the couples, is there something you learned about your mate – how their thinking and feeling – that you didn't know before? And most of the time, they both find things they didn't understand after years of arguing and living with each other in a state of disconnect. And that new understanding, almost always, guides them to change their own behavior and their efforts to find solutions to their issues. How can you help someone find a solution if you don't know what they want? So once the issue is resolved, they almost always say, "Well, there's nothing to forgive, because we don't have a problem now."

Marriage is supposed to be a humbling experience. We are all to learn that our mate is not the only one who damages the relationship. It takes two to tango. Even with adultery, quite often, when people explain why they were unfaithful, it often goes back to a lack of communication and the resulting unmet needs in the relationship. The marriage wasn't good to begin with. Now,

I'm not making an excuse for wrongdoing. I'm just explaining why it happens. You know, Jesus said to the woman – that the Pharisees caught in adultery – “I don't judge you. I'm not going to put you down. I'm not going to find fault with you. I'm not going pick on you. But go and sin no more!” That's what we're trying to get to in relationships when there are ruptures – to not to pick on each other, not to find fault, not to judge, not to try to get even, but to fix the relationship so people don't feel like they need to go somewhere else to get their emotional needs met. Go and sin no more! Work things out.

There's one last thing I want to pass on related to ruptured relationships. We've talked a lot about how ruptures occur – because of unmet needs. And when that happens, there's a crisis. A crisis is always so unpleasant that people feel desperate enough to drop their hard won position sometimes and seek solutions. So that mean that a crisis – no matter how unpleasant it is – rather than being a terrible destructive thing, *can* be an opportunity for connection. You just have to know what to do.

Okay, that's it for this one. Next time we're going to talk about commitment, which is another organizing principle of marriage – a vital ingredient for happy marriage – God-based or not.

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Until next time, this is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.