

High Maintenance Relationships: “The Sponge”

Matthew 7:6

June 19, 2011

We’re starting a new sermon series today about high maintenance relationships. I am using the book of which you see the book cover before you. It’s title is High Maintenance Relationships by Dr. Les Parrott. Based on scripture and his book, we’ll be looking at relationships that seem to cost more than they should. High maintenance relationships are like the guy who remarked about getting rid of his shinning Jaguar, He said “It’s too finicky and it takes all my time just keeping it up and running. The same is true of high maintenance relationships.” (High Maintenance Relationships, p.3)

The book of Romans tells us in chapter 12:18 states, **“If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”** How we handle relationships is extremely important to God. There are numerous times in the New Testament where we find what is often called the “One Another Scriptures,” scriptures that guide us because God cares how we treat one another.

However we all know some relationships take more effort than others to live in peace and support. Author and professor of psychology, Les Parrott states, **“I learned that some people were more difficult, if not impossible, to get along with. I learned, for an example, that trusted friends could betray me. Authority figures I admired could snub me. A colleague’s constant criticism could hurt me. And even family members could leave me out of the loop. But I also learned, that unless I wanted to be a hermit, I couldn’t abandon every relationship that hit a snag.**

(Maintenance Relationships, Parrott, P.2)

Jesus had some very pointed words to guide us in coping with

challenging relationships. But keep in mind as we go through this series that the point isn't really about changing the person who annoys us, but changing how we respond to them. Trying to control others will drive us crazy. The only person we can really change and can control is ourselves. Romans 12:18 is right, because the issue is about "as much as it depends on us." (Parrott, p.7)

However I want to look at Matthew 7:6 which is one singular great passage of scripture, packed with truth that tells us that we can have very difficult relationships; but we don't have to play into the hand of the person that makes life difficult, or the person who refuses to listen and learn.

Read Matthew 7:6

This statement from Jesus seems to be a stand alone type teaching. It has the feel of the type of guidance we would find in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs is filled with one simple truth that contains big implications. If there was one picture to describe the type of negative relationship described in Matthew 7:6, I believe it would be a sponge. Jesus is describing a relationship that is like a sponge that lives in the ocean. The sponge survives as water passes through and the sponge absorbs all the nutrients it wants out of the water. The sponge never does anything. It never moves. It's just there soaking, absorbing all it needs.

Some people can live in a similar way. They seem to let others do all their hard work. A few years back there was a movie made entitled, "What about Bob?" It starred Richard Dreyfuss and Bill Murray. Murray plays the role of a patient who psychologically speaking is like a human sponge absorbing what he needs to live from his overdependence on his Psychiatrist played by Richard Dreyfuss. When the psychiatrist goes on vacation, Bob follows him to his vacation spot because Bob is so needy. Take a look at

that scene.

Clip - Take a look - "What about Bob."

Some relationships are sponge like. The person in our life who seems to take and take and seldom if ever tries to give back to us or anyone else.

The sponge is the person who is constantly in need.

The sponge is the one who always has a crisis and you're their knight in shining armor, you're their answer every time.

The sponge will soak up your time and advice and never change.

THE TRAP – Christians are expected to be generous, but Jesus said, "**Do not give...**"

If you have a relationship that feels like a sponge in your life the first thing Matthew 7:6 can offer to us is the permission for breaking free from the trap that especially that we as Christians can fall into. The trap is that as Christians we are supposed to be generous. The trap is since we follow Jesus, and he is the ultimate example of giving we believe we should never say no. Yet, Jesus the greatest giver of all time says what, "don't give." I was reading this passage the other day and I was coming through the first 5 verses of this chapter and Jesus is talking about not judging and those words remind us to be careful and patient and understanding, and then you hit this passage and Jesus says don't give. For many of us as we meet this passage it's like we can hear the mental brakes in our heads screeching as we try and take in the words of Jesus that said, don't give. We do a double take because the greatest example of self-giving said; there is a time not to give.

The one take away from this verse is we don't have to fall in the guilt trap of giving every time to people in various situations. This verse doesn't give us license to be selfish. But it simply implies we need not fall into the guilt trap. There are some situations and relationships where God's truth could be telling us not to give.

See the situation – Jesus said, **“Do not give what is holy to the dogs...don’t cast your pearls before the swine...”**

Jesus said do not give to the dogs...don’t cast your pearls to the swine...”

Those are very pejorative, negative, descriptive words about people, and likening them to dogs, swine or pigs. Dogs and pigs were not very revered in the days of Jesus. In the days of Jesus, people would laugh if you said to them, hello I am from the future and in the future there will be stores we call PETCO and Hollywood Feed to buy special food and toys to pamper our dogs because they are like family to us. There is some uncertainty of just how these words are to be taken; but overall it is clear to be called a dog, a swine, a pig was a very demeaning connotation in the days of Jesus.

So whether this scripture is uncomfortable or not for us to absorb, one thing Jesus was doing, was not only tell us not to give; **but telling us not to be blind to our relationships.** Don’t give because we need to see the situation for what it is. There are relationships we can have where we need to see the giving is getting wasted. We need to see the waste and why and how it is happening. It’s a trap we are to avoid. It’s a trap where there is no reason as a Christian we need to feel guilty when we don’t give and say no. Confronting some high maintenance relationships means seeing the situation for what it is - a trap of wastefulness and destructiveness. To live as peacefully as we can means to take the blinders off and not give in to the misuse.

Helping can be hurting – Jesus said, **“...they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.”**

If this focus on these types of words from Jesus is difficult to come to terms with then consider why Jesus would take a stand like this.

My best interpretation is that Jesus is pointing to what we all experience from time to time in relationships. Helping can be hurting in the long run. **Jesus said, “They will trample them under foot, and turn and maul you.” Helping in the long run can mean not only we get hurt; but the person we are helping is not getting helped; they’re getting hurt.**

He warns the relationships that are like sponges just keep draining and taking and then takes a little more. Eventually it destroys us by draining us and the person who is so needy never grows in maturity themselves. There is negative transformation of those who give and no positive transformation for those who receive.

- This could be the person who never learns how to manage money as long as they know they can be given money.
- It is the person who never sets priorities about what needs to get done, because they can always get someone to help them with a task at the last minute.

Make good use of the sacred – Jesus said, **“what is holy...”**

Jesus said, “do not give what is holy to the dogs, do not cast your pearls before the swine...”

The word holy means something that is set aside for God’s purposes. The word holy means don’t give something that should be used for godly purposes if it is clearly going to be wasted. Don’t give something of godly value if all it will do is reinforce the ways of living that are not pleasing to God.

The decision, power and responsibility lies within our hands. The relationships and circumstances that drain us, sponge off of us, impose can only do so if we allow and play along. Unless they have a gun to our back making demands, then the words of Jesus “do not give” do not cast” apply to us if we believe we are being drained in some way. His words remind us we have a choice. We

have a choice to decide whether we will play into the unnecessary demands of the person. Although there is within Christianity a great deal of emphasis on giving and living a life of generosity, Dr. Parrott says, **“Don’t be a “yes addict.”** (p.141)

Conclusion

If you have a relationship in your life where it feels like sponge and you want start responding differently there are some steps we can take but all steps with Christian love. One key Dr. Parrott recommends is to find characteristics of the high maintenance person in yourself so that you will “be more patient,” “have more empathy,” “more grace to do unto to others what you would have them do unto you.” (Parrott, p. 8) In a sense he is saying, see the way we can be like a sponge. But you might be thinking no way am I sponge, I am a lot of things but I don’t just take and take.

All of us sponge off of God.

- We can want assurance of forgiveness, of answered prayers, of going to heaven; but do not give as much as we receive.
- God calls us to know his will but we ignore learning his holy word.
- God calls us to serve; yet we refuse.
- We’ve been forgiven; yet we hold grudges.
- The Church can plead for people to be involved but our response can be minimal.

But there are practical biblical steps to respond. Those “One Another” scriptures I mentioned earlier can help.

Galatians 5:13 states we are to serve one another. Examine why you keep helping. Are you helping to truly serve them or perhaps serve yourself in some way so you can feel needed, powerful or in control.

James 5:16 says we are to pray for one another. Pray for discernment to make sure you're giving and helping is what will truly help and not keep the person depended on you.

Hebrews 10:24 reminds us to provoke one another to love and good works. Challenge the relationship by deflating the crisis, meaning help guide the person to see they can resolve and endure their hardships and most hurts will heal.

Provoke them to good works by saying no to their request so they grow in doing their own good works of coping with life by investing themselves in their own happiness.