

Eating Twinkies with Friends

Matthew 18:15-17

It seems to me that these days we trust less, are more suspicious, and are fearful of opening ourselves up to others. Most of us have many acquaintances, but very few truly close friends.

We're isolated and alone, wall ourselves behind closed doors, and make an effort to know the people who live near us.

Twenty years ago (2000) Robert Putnam wrote *Bowling Alone* highlighting the decline of social networking in America. He noted that while more people were bowling, fewer were doing so in leagues. There's been a steady decline of civic involvement, neighborhood relationships, and participation in volunteer and religious organizations.

Therapist Will Miller wrote something similar a book he titled *Refrigerator Rights*. He says we need people in our lives who have what he calls "refrigerator rights." The kind of the person who can come into our home and feel comfortable going to our refrigerator to make a sandwich without asking to do so. Miller argues that too many Americans suffer mentally and emotionally because they have too few close relationships.¹

I think he's on to something! We're suffering from a lack of involvement with one another.

Sometime back a team headed by a Harvard social scientist tracked the lives of 7,000 people over nine years. They learned that people with the fewest personal relationships were three times more likely to die than those with strong relational connections. Three times!

In fact, people with bad health habits (such as smoking, poor eating habits, obesity, or alcohol use), but who had strong social ties lived significantly longer than people who had great health habits but lived isolated lives.

Said another way, it's better to eat Twinkies with good friends than to eat broccoli alone!

The first thing we need to see this morning is that **relationships are important**. Relationships matter. In fact, in the long run, the only thing that really matters in life are relationships. We need our relationships to be strong and we want them to last.

Now listen to Jesus' words: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you've won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church..."

Now, this doesn't mean your brother in a literal sense, although it could. Jesus is talking about our brothers and sisters within the church. You see, the early church was a family, and like any family, it could be broken and filled with strife.

Today Jesus would have us interpret "brother" as anyone with whom we have a strong personal relationship. "If your brother sins against you," says Jesus, "go and show him his fault, just between the two of you . . ."

¹ Will Miller with Glenn Sparks, *Refrigerator Rights* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2002).

In other words, **if someone you care about hurts you, make an effort to heal the relationship as quickly as possible even if you are not at fault.** That's sound, practical advice. And so hard to do. Because our pride so often keeps us from taking that first step.

Gilbert and Sullivan are two of the great names of musical theater. Their operettas have thrilled millions. But for years, even though they collaborated with each other, they were estranged from each other.

Gilbert would send Sullivan the lyrics of the operetta they were working on by mail, and Sullivan would send Gilbert the music back by mail.

On opening night, they would stand at opposite ends of the stage and bow facing the audience, so that they wouldn't have to look at each other.

The origin of their falling out? It was over the purchase of new carpet in one of their theaters, and they never settled that grudge.²

Why is it that the closer the relationship, the more intense the anger, resentment, and bitterness. And it's very, very difficult to take the first step. Yet Jesus tells us that it doesn't really matter who's at fault. All that matters is the relationship.

But listen to what he says next, "... and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

In other words, says Jesus, **there are times when a relationship must end.** Now we have to be careful here. Jesus is not advocating that we end a relationship at the first sign that a person is not listening. If that were the case, too many marriages would be ending today!

He's talking about those times when, after praying and working to heal a relationship, after taking the first step again and again, it becomes apparent that the other person will not even come half way. Then the relationship needs to come to an end.

It may tear your heart out, but there comes a time when you must face the reality that some relationships cannot be healed.

So let's review before we wrap this up: relationships matter. If you have a relationship that's been broken and can be healed, sometimes you need to take the first step. Not every relationship can be healed. **And we must never forget that our primary relationship is with God.**

If a relationship that's important to us cannot be healed, we need to reach out to friends, especially in the church, as Christ suggests. But the most important place we need to turn is to God.

We must pray for God to heal the relationship. And we must pray to God to heal us if the relationship cannot be healed, to help us accept the inevitable, and to keep us from bitterness and resentment.

But even more, we must pray that this experience of a broken relationship will draw us closer to God. For it is from our relationship with God, not from other people, that we draw our strength and our identity.

² Charles L. Allen, *The Secret of Abundant Living* (Old Tappan, N J: Spire Books, Fleming H. Revell, 1980), p. 91.