

WHAT'S THE POINT?

All our
relationships are
in some way
broken, because
we all sin.



1. ARE ALL RELATIONSHIPS BROKEN IN SOME WAY?

When I say the word *relationship*, a different image will come to mind for all of us. Some will think about their husband, their wife, their mum or wee aunty Jeanie; for others it could stir up memories of their dad (that day he took them to the beach); some may instantly think of their boyfriend or girlfriend. The list is endless. In some way, shape, or form, we are all in a relationship with someone. It ranges from the most temporary of relationships—like our child's teacher—to the in-depth best friend that knows what we are thinking before we've said it. Each of these relationships will obviously be different. It's not like we're going to have the same relationship with our girlfriend as the wee man at the local shop, is it? And if we do, then there is something seriously twisted going on!

STOP

Who are you in a relationship with?

How we handle our relationships is important.

Where do we even begin with them all?

How do I handle my relationship with my son?

What kind of sister should I be?

How am I supposed to deal with the whole boyfriend thing now that I am a Christian?

More importantly, does the Bible actually have anything relevant to say?

That last question is why we are reading this book. In it, we are going to start thinking about what the Bible has to say about relationships and how we are to handle them as Christians.

Let's be frank and get the truth out there from the start: all our relationships are broken! *'That's mighty harsh'*, you might be saying. But it's a truth we can't deny. They might be good relationships, but they aren't, by any stretch of the imagination, perfect.

STOP

Just think about it for a second as you reflect on your own relationships. Pick one. What are its strengths and weaknesses?

We might be the best parent and most loving spouse anyone could ever want, but we're not perfect, and neither are our relationships. You sin. They sin. We all sin.

So, where did it all go wrong, and what's it supposed to look like?

In the beginning, God set out four basic relationships for every person.

Our relationship with Him.

How we relate to ourselves.

How we relate to other people.

How we relate to creation—the world about us.

Each of those relationships has a purpose.

STOP

What do you think the purpose of each relationship is?

- ✦ God?
- ✦ Myself?
- ✦ Other people?
- ✦ The world around me?

In our relationship with **God**, we are supposed to glorify Him. We talked about this a lot in Book 6—*Character*.¹ We are to represent God, and when people look at our lives, they should recognise who God is in us.

Simple, right? We've got that sussed! No? Me neither. At least, not all the time.

We aren't helpful to **ourselves**. We sin, and I'm not just talking about smashing through the tub of ice cream in front of the TV. We have this desire to run towards things that are bad for us and run away from what is good. We are our own biggest influencers, and we often aren't a good influence.



'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' (Eph. 4:2-3).

In **Ephesians 4:2-3**, Paul describes what our relationships with **other people** should look like. We are to be humble, gentle, patient and, to top it off, we are to put up with each other in love. Now, we might be able to pull that off *some* of the time, but not always, and certainly not with everyone. We might not want to

1 Sharon Dickens, *Character—How Do I Change?* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2019).

think about the next relationship because we know where this one is heading.

In our relationship with **the world around us**, we are supposed to take care of creation and use the resources it gives us well. No fly-tipping or litter dropping; always recycling; only shopping organically; and never buying things tested on animals. We are to eat meat from approved farms; think of our carbon footprint; never waste; weave our own cloth and sew our own clothes (made from natural fibres that are sustainable, of course). Okay, I'm being facetious, but you get my point. We are to be good caretakers of God's creation.

STOP

So, what went wrong? Why do you think we are so bad at these four relationships?

We can delude ourselves into thinking we're smashing this relationship stuff, but the trouble is, many of our relationships these days are from the safe distance of a Facebook page, Snapchat, or a text message. We find these types of relationships easier to manage. But when we think about the relationships closer to home, people we have to live and work with, we know it doesn't take long before sin rears its ugly head and has an impact. Minor offences suddenly become major infractions, and we are full of rage. Simple misunderstandings cloud the once mutual appreciation we had for one another. And, if we are not careful, our best pal walks past us in the street and acts like they don't even know us.

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, sin entered the world—and this has had a lasting impact upon us. It has shattered these four foundational relationships.



'But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear' (Isa. 59:2).

We are a flawed, sinful and broken people who, for the most part, are self-deceived and blind to our own sinfulness. We kid ourselves into thinking that we are doing alright. We tell ourselves that our relationships are not that bad. But, it's not true.

So often, being in relationships brings out the worst in us. The sad reality is that the closer the relationship, the worse we tend to be. That's when we get a glimpse of the real us. And most of the time, it's not pretty.

I realise relationships aren't all tears and tantrums. In fact, they can be amazing, fun and loving. But every relationship faces difficulties, and I know there have been times when we've all thought, *'I've had enough—I don't need this hassle anymore!'* Yet, despite this, God uses our relationships. He's using them to help us change and grow.



ILLUSTRATION

When a blacksmith wants to shape a bit of metal, he heats it in the furnace, bashes it with a hammer, heats it some more, and then, when it's red-hot and pliable, he moulds it into the shape he wants. Without the extreme heat, metal can't be shaped. God uses our relationships like the blacksmith uses the fire. There isn't one of us who relates to everyone perfectly. Our relationships are shaped in the forge of our daily struggles.



'What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions' (James 4:1-3, ESV).

James doesn't mess around in this text. He gets straight to the point when he says that fights and quarrels are caused by **our desires, our lusts**. We want something we aren't getting: respect, justice, being heard, power, attention, whatever. And if we don't get what we want, we kick off in some way.

STOP

What's the thing that always gets you angry? What is it you want that you're not getting?

R. T. Kendall wrote a book called *The Way of Wisdom*. He says that what we see in James 4 'were Christians who hadn't really come to grips with themselves, their grudges, their jealousy, their own hearts, their own lusts. They were blaming their problems on outward conditions or each other.'² In other words, they were never looking at themselves. He goes on to say that in our congregations, and in our own hearts, quarrels can be traced back to our failure to set our affections on the things above: namely, Christ. Basically, he is saying that all too often our eyes are looking in the wrong direction. We too often look at ourselves and not at the Lord. R. T. Kendall goes on to reflect that it is possible to be '**outwardly moral and inwardly rebellious**'³; rotten. All goody-two-shoes on the outside, but rotten to the core inside. Kendall says that Satan doesn't care how moral we are if he can keep us torn up inside.

'Okay,' I hear you saying, 'I know I'm not perfect, but I'm not as bad as them—have you seen how they behave?' We like to think we aren't as bad as others. We don't want to look at or admit our own rottenness. Instead, we distract ourselves by focusing on someone else. After all, there's always someone whose behaviour is worse than ours.

2 R. T. Kendall, *The Way of Wisdom: Patience in Waiting on God; Sermons on James 4–5* (The New Westminster Pulpit Series; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005), p. 6.

3 Kendall, *The Way of Wisdom*, p. 3