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## **MINISTRIES, INC.**

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### **Grace Liberates Our Relationships**

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Good evening. That was encouraging. I want you to do something for me. If you are a parent, I want to raise your hand--please keep it raised. Now all of you who have your hands raised, unless you have some kind of dire emergency tomorrow night between seven and nine, it's just dumb for you not to be here.

It's two hours out of your life that may radically change everything you think about this world of parenting. How did I do? Elyse didn't ask me to do that, but I know the kind of material she's going to bring with her and her daughter, and listen, it is very, very valuable, very, very important for you to say, "Nothing is going to stop me from being here tomorrow night between seven and nine. Please do that.

Well, I have this question for you. Well, I want to say this first. I want to make a confession. My confession is, "I never follow my assignments when I'm in these conferences." I'm known for that, and so rather than just speaking on marriage, I want to speak on all relationships so no one has any reason for tuning this out this evening.

And I want to ask you this question, "Why in the world are marriages so hard, relationships so hard, parenting so hard, friendships so hard?" Don't look at me like you don't know what I'm talking about. You have never had a relationship in your life that hasn't disappointed you in some way. Isn't that incredible, not one? What is all of that about? If you were going to write an answer to that question this evening, what would you write?

Well, I think maybe the way to get into this evening is tell you a little bit of my own story. I'm a father of grown children, and when our children were growing up, we would take vacations with our children; we live in Philadelphia, down to the Jersey Shore. In Philadelphia, you say you're going, "down the shore." I don't know why they say it that way, but they do.

And we would lay on the beach in New Jersey and pick up medical waste. Our kids thought hypodermics were shells. Seriously, we would go to Ocean City, it's a really wonderful, family place, and our kids have fond memories of that.

So occasionally, we will gather our family, once again, married children would come; my daughter who is grown and single, she would come; and we'll spend this nostalgic week in Ocean City. And one of the things I do, because I have done a lot of cooking in our family, is to make some of the things that our children are fond of.

And there was a particular morning where I'm going to make the world's best, there's no debate, cinnamon rolls. These are an edible glory. And I'm, while I'm thinking about doing that, I am thinking about what's going to happen.

That morning I'm going to make those rolls; I am going to put them in the oven, and that gorgeous smell is going to waft throughout that vacation house, and my children are going to lay in bed and say, "How could it be that God would love me so much that this particular man, who makes these glorious rolls, could be my father?" I know that's going to happen.

And so, I'm now on that morning; I'm making the rolls, and I'm thinking about the glory that's to come, and the praise I'm going to receive which is my just do, and I'm now putting the rolls in the oven, and I'm sitting at a chair that's looking down the hallway because I know what's going to happen. The doors are going to begin to open, and my children are going to come and stand at my feet and say, "How could you be such a wonderful dad?"

The first door opens, and my son walks down the hallway, and he says to me these shocking words, "Dad, do you mind if I make something else for breakfast?" What you mean, "Do I mind? Are you an idiot?" And he says, "My wife, interloper that she is, doesn't like to eat something so sweet in the morning."

I think, "Who does she think she is?" And I sort of squeak out a, "Yeah, that's okay." In my heart, I am thinking, "This is not okay. This breaks every rule you could ever break."

Well, we're now at the table, and she's seated in the middle of this table, right positioned in front of this glorious mound of edible wonderfulness--eating eggs, eggs, and eggs! Now I know I'm not supposed to be angry. I know this is not supposed to bother me. But it does. It makes me mad. I'm Paul 'cinnamon roll' Tripp, for Pete's sake. Eat your eggs somewhere else.

Now, in ways that you may not understand that, that is a deeply, fundamentally, theological moment. I'm serious, and if you don't understand the theology of that moment, you won't gain ground in those kinds of things. We can be so demanding; we can be so creepy; we can be so full of ourselves--10 out of 10 people in this room struggle with these things.

Now before I take you to a passage of Scripture, I want to say something to you about this Book that we're going to look at. I don't know if you've noticed this or not, but your Bible is not arranged by topic. That freaks some of you out because you wish it was arranged by topic so you could just go to the tabs on the side, and go to your topic of interest, and find what you want.

Well, the Bible is not arranged the way it is because of Divine editorial error, but because of Divine intention. The Bible is a grand, redemptive story, and that's the way the Bible operates. And by grace, God is embedding my story in the larger story of redemption. As I get the bigger story, I understand my little story. That's how it works.

And so, to the degree that every passage tells me things about God, and things about life in this fallen world, and things about the operation of sin, and things about the rescue of grace--to that degree, every passage tells me things about everything in life—that's how the Bible works. So if you're going to understand relationships, you can't just run to the relational passages because you'll miss the vast majority of information the Bible has to say about relationships because it's not arranged by topic.

Second thing: I love the fact that the Bible is the world's best diagnostic. Nothing understands, nothing unpacks, nothing exegetes, if you will, nothing explains the human dilemma, the human struggle like the Word of God does. If you want to understand what's wrong, the Bible will tell you what's wrong. And because of that, the Bible alone offers you the world's only workable cure, because you will recognize that effective cure is always attached to accuracy of diagnosis, that's the way it works--bad diagnosis, no cure.

Okay, now we are ready. Turn to II Corinthians, chapter 5. Paul is giving a bit of a defense or explanation of his ministry--why he does the things he does and says the things he says. And we're going to jump into that with verse 14; I just want to read two simple verses for you:

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all (Now pay very careful attention.) that... (That word 'that' introduces a purpose statement.) that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

Let me read this again: verse 15, "...and he died for all," (for the purpose) "that those who live might no longer live" (What does it say?) "for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."

Now, I don't know what you've thought about this passage, but this is the ultimate diagnostic of why relationships can be such a struggle, so hurtful, so dysfunctional. How could it be that this person that I once adored; this person, when I heard the sound of their voice, my heart would lift; this person that I felt such community with can make me so angry, so distressed; we can have so much tension between us, you couldn't cut it with a knife; you'd have to cut it with a chainsaw—why?

Well, here's what it says, "Sin causes all of us to shrink our worlds down to the claustrophobic confines of our wants, our needs, our feelings." Sin is self-obsessed; sin is self-focused; sin inserts me in the center of my world--the one place I must never be. Sin makes me quest for my own sovereignty. Sin makes me full of myself. Sin makes it all about me. Sin makes me a vat of selfish thoughts, and desires, and wants.

I want chocolate at ready-reach all the time. Just coat the world in it; it would be easier to take a bite at any moment. I want to drive on roads paid for by other citizens who choose not to use them. I want a wife who says, "Of course, Paul, I agree with you. I have lived for the glory that is you." I want children to say, "I will forthwith go and obey,



me much more concerned about my little definition of my needs, all the things I want, all the things I feel. Sin is this sadly dysfunctional, inward way of living life.

Now, here's what this means, and you have to humbly confess this. That means, as long as sin still lives inside of you, you carry around inside of you, yes; you carry around inside of you something that's fundamentally destructive to relationships. And I don't know if you've thought about this, but you can escape locations, and you can escape situations, and you can escape relationships, but no matter how fast you run, or no matter how far you run, you always show up with you at the end of the run. You can't escape you and this danger that lives inside of you.

Third thing, if the DNA of sin is selfishness, if that means sin is fundamentally antisocial, here's a third thing that it will do. It will dehumanize the people in my life. No longer are they objects of affection; they get reduced to vehicles or obstacles. If you're a vehicle, helping me get what I want, I love you; I thank God you are in my life, cards and flowers. But if you stand in the way of what I want, I'm spontaneously angry, and I want to remove you or co-opt you back into the service of what I want.

Listen! If you don't think that applies to you, let me ask you this question, "How much of your anger and relationships over the past month had anything whatsoever to do with the kingdom of God?" Own it! Own it! We're angry! We are angry because you're in the way of what I want; that means you don't get your job description.

Now, you see this in relationships. If you're giving way to this selfishness of sin, it just makes a mess of relationships. You can be so incredibly demanding, so incredibly picky. You have a perversibility to make a big thing out of things that are not a big thing.

Maybe you're a wife, and you go into the bathroom, and there's a wet towel on the floor. And you say, "I can't believe it. I just can't believe it. (Sniff, sniff) I can't believe that he'd leave a wet towel on the floor. If he loved me, I'd never see wet towels on the floor. I can't believe that he just drops things. My dad was a dropper. I told myself that I'd never marry a dropper, but I have!" Now, it's a towel. If you lose your mind over that kind of thing, how are you ever going to get to the real significant, important stuff in your relationship?

Or you are riding with somebody, and they haven't reached your level of driving, and you say, "You know, you drive jerky. It's like this...(jerking motion)...look out the window. Those cars are just going...(smoothly)...and we're going ...(jerking motion). I need Dramamine to ride with you!" Or you can't even have somebody serve you well without you making a big deal of it.

I have an eye condition, and I don't see very well at night. With the light and darkness, my eyes don't shift very well between, and things get blurry. I've told Luella, my dear wife, that I've figured it out that there are mobile blobs and stationary blobs, and the idea is to avoid them both. It doesn't make her feel very comfortable, so she said that she'll drive.

And we're heading out in Philadelphia on an agreed-upon destination, and we get to a light where I would've turned; she goes straight. I can't leave that alone. I say, "Where are you going?"

She says, "This is the way I go."

I can't leave that alone. I say, "I think it's the wrong way. You know the shortest distance between two points is a straight line."

She says, "That's why I didn't turn." She says, "You know, Paul, I don't think it's actually a right or a wrong. I just think it's a preference." Now, that makes sense, right? I can't leave that alone.

I say, "What if my preference is right?"

She says, "Paul, why don't we just do this...when you drive, you choose the directions; and when I drive, I'll choose the directions." That's a sensible solution.

I can't leave that alone, and I say, "Luella, if we were in a helicopter right now, and we were flying over Philadelphia, and we would swoop down on this location, you would know that my way is the right way."

Luella looked at me and says, "Paul, I don't think a helicopter is what you need right now."

Listen! I'm not surprised at the masses of dysfunctional relationships around us. I'm surprised at how many actually work; we're full of ourselves, and we need help. You see, I'm about to hurt your feelings, but that's my job. Hear what I am about to say. If what Paul is proposing, that the DNA of sin is selfishness, that it's antisocial in its fundamental form, that it will dehumanize the people in my life, then, I have to say this, oh, this is so hard to say, but this is the portal to liberation. Here it is: "I am my greatest relational problem. It's me."

Now, don't misunderstand me. I know that you'll be sinned against. I know that people suffer abusive things, but my greatest, long-term, deepest difficulty in relationships actually exist inside of me and not outside of me. I don't believe we believe that.

If I'm doing marriage counseling, and I ask the husband what he thinks is wrong with his marriage, who do you think he is going to talk about? He's not going to talk about himself. And, if I ask the wife the same question, guess who she's going to talk about? Now at that point, as a counselor, I'm out of a job because there are no seekers in the room. The husband is just there to get his wife fixed; the wife is there to get her husband fixed; nobody wants what I have to offer.

And, that's why, hear the cure, Paul says, "Jesus came for this focused and distinct purpose." Hear what I am about to say, "...to rescue you from you." In His grace alone, we're rescued from us. That grace changes the whole paradigm; it changes the whole lifestyle; that grace is meant not just to give you future hope or past hope, wonderful

past hope, wonderful future hope, but to greet you in your struggle in the here and now. That grace liberates you from you so; you can actually have a thing that could be described as a relationship. Listen! I think we live in unrelational, nonrelational relationships. We make relationships work by not relating.

Now, three things that grace frees you from, here's the first one...frees you from your bondage to your righteousness. You see if your hope and security in life, if you've put all your personal rest, inner sense of well-being in the basket of your righteousness, it is very hard for you to have a relationship. It's very hard to live with you because you cannot be wrong.

You must defend your words; you must defend your actions; you will have a very active, inner lawyer that will argue for the right of what you've done; you become defensive, and acrimonious, and unapproachable. It makes relationships very hard because there becomes no basis for wrong to be dealt with because I must hold onto my own righteousness; I must convince myself that I'm righteous, and I must convince you that I'm righteous, and there will be no change there. We're locked in something that won't allow us to discuss the things and look at the things that will lead to change; we're trapped.

But what God gives us, in His Son, is a righteousness that's not our own. I couldn't achieve acceptance with God; I couldn't be righteous enough. The reason Jesus says, "Don't parade your righteousness in front of other people" is because you don't have any. And so once I get it, once I get it's not about me, it's not about me measuring up; it's not about how good I have to be; it's about Christ. He's done that for me. I stand as righteous before God. Praise Him!

Then, I can be a bit of a mess because I am. I don't have to defend my words anymore; I don't have to make you think that I'm something that I'm not. I don't have to live as a very skilled self-swindler because my security, my rest is not in my righteousness; it's in the righteousness of Christ. And so, we can be open, and humble, and approachable. Now we can begin to deal with our mess.

What it allows is these two character qualities that are qualities of any healthy relationship. Here is the first one: the humility of approachability. I become an approachable person because I'm resting in a righteousness that's not my own.

Second character quality is the courage of loving honesty. I'm not afraid to speak the truth to you because I'm not actually afraid of your rejection because my well-being is not in your acceptance. My well-being is in the acceptance that was purchased by righteous Christ for me. And so, we can be humbly approachable, and we can be courageously honest, and that means we now begin to deal with all the things that so many people cannot talk about. I don't any longer have an active, inner lawyer. I'm not worried about your inner child; I think that your inner lawyer is much more active.

Second thing: I don't have to be in control. I love these words; these words are precious, precious, precious. Jesus said this, "Fear not, little flock, for your heavenly

father has graciously chosen to give you the kingdom.” You see, it's not me trying to construct this kingdom and placing my hope in, that somehow I can build the world of my dreams.

And so, I'm always beaten by the 'If only's' or the 'What if's'. I've always got to be in charge; I've always got to have my way; I've always got to be in control. I'm trying to be the sovereign that I will never be; I'm trying to manipulate people, and threaten people, and guilt people into service of my kingdom. And, listen, that person hasn't married me so that I would be their king. That person is not my friend so that I would be their king. It can't work.

I love the way Jesus talks about that; He uses the word 'treasure'. You're always living for some kind of treasure. You're either living for earthbound treasures or the huge, eternal treasures of the kingdom of God. And treasure is an interesting word because most treasures don't have intrinsic value; most treasures have assigned value. Think about this.

Remember the old saying, “One man's trash,” (Can you finish it?) “is another man's treasure.” That's about 'assigned value', so you are always assigning value to the things in your life. And, hear this, your relationships are always victimized or enhanced and propelled by what you treasure, to the degree that you treasure what God says is valuable...to that degree your relationships thrive.

Here's what God does; this is an amazing thing. The Bible says that He invades that self-oriented kingdom of darkness. I love these words. And He transports me to the kingdom of His Son. I am now quite a part from anything I could've ever earned, anything I could've ever achieved, anything I could've ever deserved. I am now the citizen of that grand and glorious kingdom of God where all of the true treasures worth living for have now been given to me even though I couldn't have earned them. How's that for a beautiful message?

I can wake up in the morning, and say, “Yesterday was a hard day for us as a family, but I'm rich! I'm rich, I'm rich, I'm rich, I'm rich, I'm rich! My boss doesn't treat me very well, but I'm loved. I'm loved! I'm loved! I'm loved! Our finances don't work always the way I'd like them to work, but I am so fully supplied by grace.” All of a sudden, I don't have to demand the temporary pleasures of that claustrophobic kingdom of one. And do you know why Jesus says that they're temporary, moss-eaten, rust destroying, and thief stealing? Do you know why he wants you to know that? ...Because they have no capacity whatsoever to satisfied your heart.

“Fear not, little flock, your heavenly father has chosen to give you the kingdom,” a much better kingdom. You don't have to be a king anymore; the King has come.

Third thing: Now it frees me from my bondage to my righteousness, and my bondage to control, my bondage to unrealistic expectations. Apart from grace, I'm going to seek horizontally from the people in my life what I will only ever be given vertically. I will

actually ask the people in my life to be my own personal messiah; make me feel good about myself; give me meaning and purpose; make me happy.

I don't know if you know this or not, but I want you to hear me say it. "No one in this room is in relationship with a person who is the fourth member of the trinity. There are only three seats, and they are very well occupied."

You see, when I try to turn people into my own messiah, when I attach my identity, my meaning and purpose, my inner sense of well-being to them, it never leads to unity; it never leads to love; it never leads to romance; it never leads to any of the good stuff of relationship. It only leads to disappointment, and frustration, and bitterness, and hurt, and anger, and alienation, and hopelessness, and ultimately aloneness. It can't work.

I've had hundreds of wives, I sort of get what they're saying to me, but it scares me every time I hear them say it. They say, "All I ever wanted was a man who would make me happy." I think, "Well, that man's cooked," because he should nourish you; he should cherish you; he should love you deeply, but he will never pull off being the source of your happiness. Here's every human relationship; it's a flawed person, in a relationship to a flawed person, in a fallen world, (Are you encouraged yet?) ...but with a faithful God.

You see, apart from grace, you seek here what you can only find here. Here is what grace says, "You have already been given everything you need for life and godliness." Done! Over! You don't have to wait for it; it's yours in Christ. It's yours in Christ!

Now, notice the two words Peter uses in II Peter 1, verse 3, I just quoted: "...Everything you need for life and godliness." Why does he use two words? Well, because he knows his audience. If he said, "...just everything for life," we'd say, "Oh, yeah! We have everything we need for eternal life." That's not the subject that he is talking about. That's a wonderful thing, but that is not his topic.

So he says, "...godliness"...I've been given everything I need. This is glorious! To be what I'm supposed to be, and do what I'm supposed to do, in the place where God has placed me right now. What's godliness is a God-honoring life from the time I come to Christ and the time I go home to be with Him.

We must embrace for the salvation of our relationships the 'nowism' of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. I've got it. I don't look to you for my hope; I don't look to you for my identity; I don't look to you for my energy; I don't look to you for my acceptance. I don't look to you for all of those things. I already have them in Christ. And, I can lift that burden off your shoulders; you don't have to bear that burden anymore; you're not my savior. I free you in the name of Jesus. How beautiful is that?

Now hear this. That work that I'm discussing was given to you in an instant; that's justification, and is taken on and acquired by you in a process; that's sanctification. So, I am free and in need of being freed, right? I still have places where I hang on to my defective righteousness and have to be right. There are still places where I make it all about my kingdom and have to be in control. And there are places where I still place

unrealistic expectations in the people in my life, asking them to give me salvation that I've already been given. And so, I celebrate the grace I've been given, and I pray for further liberation. Welcome to your relational world.

So, here is what you do; I'm going to give you your assignment. You wake up tomorrow morning, and you pray these three prayers: "God, I'm a person in desperate need of help this morning. God, I'm a person in desperate need of help this morning."

Second prayer: "I pray that in Your grace, You would send Your helpers my way."

Third prayer: "I pray when the help comes, that you would give me the humility to receive it with joy."

Pray that you are a desperate person in need of help; God, I'd pray that you would send your helpers my way today. And, oh Lord, I would pray that you would please give me the grace to receive the help when it comes.

What's the hope of your relationships? Well, to sing this: "Jesus paid it all, All to Him I owe." Can you finish it? "Sin had left the crimson stain, He washed it white as snow." Jesus came to rescue you from you; His grace liberates you from your bondage to your righteousness; He liberates you from your bondage to your control; He liberates you from your bondage to unrealistic expectations of others, and frees you to know relationships of love that would be impossible to know apart from His grace. Now that's good news!

Let's pray: Lord, as hard as it may be for us to embrace it, we know in our heart of hearts that this diagnosis is true, that the thing we really need to be rescued from is us. And in that rescue of Your grace is the hope of the restoration of community, not only with You, but with one another. May we run to Your grace, we would pray, knowing that relationships are always first fixed vertically before they are fixed horizontally. Meet us in that very same grace, we would pray. In Jesus name, Amen. God Bless.