

The Best Relationship

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[0 : 00] The authorities who monitor the television ratings claim that more people watch the soaps than any other programs.

It may be that the Queen's Speech on Christmas Day or a World Cup final gets more in a one-off watch, but regularly, week by week, annually, the soaps head the top of the list things.

And if you were to have a look through any of the newspapers last week to look at the television programs that were there, there's a very clear clue as to why that is.

Coronation Street, one of the most popular, we were going to watch if you did watch it. Emma Quizz's Amy, Jade takes hope to A&E; and Ryan throws Ray out.

In EastEnders, Karen tells Gary about Chantel. Patrick ignores Denise and Jack. In Neighbours, Kyle faces losing Amy for good in Harlow Clashes with Paul.

[1 : 10] And in Emmerdale, Jay catches Al in the act and Leila's attraction to Liam grows. These programs are all about people or more particularly the relationships that people have.

And of course, that fascinates us because for us, relationships are hugely important. You could maybe say the most important aspect of your life.

We've just spent Christmas and New Year holidays, many of us with our families and those we love.

And it's brilliant because relationships have the capacity to give us the greatest joy and happiness.

But of course, they also, they can also bring us great pain and distress and hurt. And Jesus knew that, knew that relationships are important.

And so many of his parables, his stories deal with relationships, the one we read about the father with the two sons. And the other stories about the widow who comes, you know, and she won't give up pleading with the judge until he hears her case.

[2 : 35] You've the husband man who treats his workers in a strange way. There's lots of relationships there and that shouldn't surprise us because our relationship with God as we start this year is the most important thing there is about us.

And as we think about this parable that Jesus told about this younger son who takes the money from his father and he goes and he was it and then he comes back when times are hard.

We see a picture, a picture of our relationship with God. First of all, and if this was a drama or a play in the theater, there'd be three acts to it, wouldn't there? They're very clear.

At the beginning of the story, we see a relationship ruined. We picture the situation. A young man brought up in a home where his father provides for him, not just materially well, but provides set standards and teaches him values, wants to instill a good character in his son and the idea of helping other people, sharing what blessings you've been given.

But the son doesn't really see it that way. He sees none of this. He becomes resentful. You know, the father saying, you've got to do this and you mustn't do that and you need to think of other people.

[4 : 17] And so he dreams, you know, he fantasizes that life would be better if he was somewhere else. And he begins to think, you know, if I could just live without my father's eye watching over me all the time, if I could just live without restraints, without limitations, if I could do what I want, if I was free, you know, not having the fear of my father knowing what I was up to.

If I was fear of all these conventions that, you know, life seems to surround me with and all its limitations. And the more he dreams, the more it becomes appealing to him that he should get away.

I just want for a while he thinks to himself, you know, if I could just, if I could just for a while, you know, be away and, you know, it would help me to mature.

I would learn a lot of things about the world and, you know, didn't somebody say after all, you know, you've got to risk the boys to become the man.

And the more he thinks about this and the more he dreams about it and the more appealing it becomes, it hardens into a conviction that this is something that he has to do and he must have.

[5 : 39] And so we read there, you know, he's not thinking about his father, he's not thinking about his brother, he's not thinking about responsibilities, he's thinking just about himself.

And of course that is what selfishness does. My wife and I have a friend, a good friend, a teacher and we've heard so many times the story of how he met his wife and it gets a bit tiring after a while. He loves to tell it, how he was invited to a party and he, you know, was shown into a room crowded with people by the host and across the room he sees this beautiful woman.

And as he tells it, you know, everything around her grew dim. There was only her, a bit cheesy as the way he tells it, but that's what selfishness does.

Everybody else goes, nobody else matters, you don't see anybody else. And so inevitably it seems he goes to his father and he asks for his portion of the farm, the possessions, the belongings, give me.

[7 : 01] That's what he said, the motto of selfish people in every generation and every society and every culture. And the thing is Jewish law, Jewish tradition had it that a man didn't, the way we would think of, own things.

He really was just a steward and there was a way that he had to hand on his possessions to his family. Unfortunately the girls didn't count and they didn't get anything.

Some folks say that the older son got half and the rest was divided between the other boys. Some say it was two thirds, but whatever. This young lad knows that, you know, he is money coming and he gets it.

And off he goes to a far country, ruins his relationship with his father. And you know Jesus sums up the consequence, just six little words, what happens to him?

He squanders his money in reckless living, riotous living. And it says he began to be in want.

[8 : 15] You know, after the money's gone he began to be in want. Far from home, penniless, friendless, hopeless.

He's ruined the one relationship of substance that he probably had in all of his life. But if that's the first act, the second act still concentrates on this young man.

He's the one in the spotlight because we see his relationship recognized. Verse 17 it says, he came to himself.

His dreams were shattered. His fantasy life disappeared. His plans and the world was broken. There is always a morning after.

There are always consequences to our actions. And this young man found as countless others have found and will continue to find while the world exists, the high cost of low living.

[9 : 25] I know that for those of you who are Christians this morning, there will be folk. Maybe where you work or where you live, maybe even in your own family. You know, who rather sneer at the standards God has set and that you try to achieve in your life.

And they push those away. But you only have to look around you. You don't have to go any further than Edinburgh to see after the Christmas festivities and the New Year festivities, Hulmanay festivities I should say, and you only have to see the wreckage that people have made of many of them, of the whole of their lives.

There is a high cost to selfish and low living. And it's not difficult to imagine that young man sitting there thinking, you know, I've satisfied my appetite, I got what I wanted.

You know, I got that money. And would he have remembered that it was actually his father who gave him, who made it possible for him to live like that. And he satisfied his appetites.

He lived for pleasure. He partied. He didn't have to work. He sold his wild oats. He was his own boss. And how foolish that must seem to him now, being his own boss, having been sent by a man into the fields to feed pigs.

[11 : 02] Some years ago, a father and son in New Zealand wrote a book. They were Christian men. They wrote a book called Why Did No One Tell Me? And the subtext of it was that life can be ruined in youth.

The father was a Presbyterian minister. The son was a medical doctor. And they've been sharing that the really, the sad folk who were coming to them, who had ruined their lives when they were

young, by living in selfish ways and for pleasure.

And we all feel, you know, we would absolutely love to be able to warn people, young people especially, but others as well, that living just for yourself, that has terrible, terrible consequences. It'd be great if we could just do that. And I hope you'll forgive a story from Northern Ireland. In the very early days of the Troubles, a Roman Catholic teaching nun was a pointed head mistress of a Sink School in West Belfast.

It was West Belfast was one of the most socially deprived areas in the whole of Western Europe. You know, still thousands of homes with outside toilets and it was just a pawline place.

[12 : 23] And there was a big Roman Catholic girl school, St. Louise's. And this teaching nun, Sister Genevieve, was a pointed head. And she set about transforming it.

The girls all left at 16, none of them had any qualifications. But she set about instilling discipline and standards and whatever. She got rid of the time serving teachers.

She brought in teachers who were energetic and she got a uniform, got a local factory to make cheap uniforms. She pushed and pushed and eventually, you know, they did GCSEs, they did A-levels.

Some of them got to university, but in the early days, she had appointed another nun as a teacher, young woman. And in her appraisal, this nun said she was really enjoying teaching, but she just kept being embarrassed.

She had a fourth form girls class, you know, 14, 15 year old girls. If you have any idea what they're like when they get together, they're ghastly. They're, you know, like hezbollah, they are just awful.

[13 : 38] And they kept embarrassing this young nun by asking her to teach them the facts of life. So Sister Genevieve said, oh, right, okay. And of course they knew they were embarrassing her.

She said, well, that's okay. When's your next class? So she came down and one of the girls who was in the class said she came in and she said, I understand you want to know the facts of life. Well, here's the facts of life. If you don't get your head down and study and pass exams, get to college and university and have a career.

You'll leave here at 16, you'll be pregnant at 17, you'll marry a feckless man who'll drink and gamble away any money you earn, and you'll be old long before your time.

Now, those are the only facts of life you need to know. Get your head down and study. Now, when I read that, I just think wouldn't it be brilliant if we could tell everybody out there in the world?

[14 : 42] But of course, people don't. Sometimes it takes a long time for the penny to drop that the living God who loves us and cares for us really, is not putting restraints or limitations on us for no good reason.

It is because he loves us. But anyway, this young man, his thinking changed. He realized that his thinking was muddled and that he'd made bad choices.

He was driven by selfish motives. And I think we have to give him a little bit of credit, don't we? It can't be easy if you've chosen to live independently, to then come back and admit that you've been wrong.

And at least he didn't blame other people. He didn't blame his friends who disappeared once his money was gone. He didn't blame his boss for sending him out to feed pigs and not giving him a better job.

He didn't blame the family. He didn't do any of that. He realized it was his fault. I've sinned.

[15 : 59] And having realized and admitted this, he sets off for home. So this is the final act of this bit of the parable whenever the father comes into view.

But the first bit we read, I beg your pardon, he has a little speech prepared. And of course it only takes one person to ruin our relationship, but it takes two to renew it.

So the father comes into the picture and we see him. He's obviously been waiting. He's obviously been watching, praying, you know, wondering, where is my son?

What is he doing? Will he ever come back? If he does, what will he be like? How will it be? And verse 20 says, While he was yet a great way off, his father saw him.

I'm sure many of you have favorite verses in the Bible, but isn't that a brilliant verse? Didn't that, you know, while he was yet a great way off.

[17 : 10] It doesn't matter how far away you are from God. While he was yet a great way off, his father saw him. Probably not a day when the father hadn't prayed for him, you know, hadn't wondered.

But anyway, here he is, the lost son. And he says, Father, I've sinned against heaven and before you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.

But that's all he says. It's all the father lets him say. He doesn't get the rest of his little speech out. The father embraces him and forgives him and restores him.

And he calls the servants because it says he had compassion on him. His heart went out to him. So he doesn't bring him back to judge him and say, well, now, didn't I tell you this is what would happen?

And, you know, you've made your bed, so you're going to have to lie on it. He didn't bring him back to put him on a pillow and stoo. He brought him back and restored him. And the significance of what he asked the servants to do, bring a robe.

[18:16] That signifies honour. You know, bring a ring. That signifies authority. Bring shoes. That signifies sonship. It's as if all that had happened hadn't happened at all.

It's just totally forgotten, totally done away with. He's restored to the position that he had been in before. And, you know, this story begins with a father giving.

And this bit of it ends with a father forgiving. He's concerned only that the relationship has been renewed.

As the new year begins, this story from the Son of God, from Jesus, is surely a reminder to us all that the most important thing in our lives ought to be our relationship with God.

Because it's the best relationship we can ever have. You know, whenever people ask, you know, they see the mess and the chaos of the world and they say, what's it all about this life?

[19:30] What's it all about? Our catechism has the best answer because it's from the Bible. Man's chief end. Our lives should be to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

And we do that by having and cultivating and sustaining a personal relationship with him. The television program, Panorama, claims to be a window on the world.

You know, and it shows you the world war and peace and wealth and poverty and joy and sadness. The Bible does the same, but the Bible goes deeper.

It goes beneath surface appearances, outward views of things. It goes to the heart and it tells us that each of us, every one of us, whoever we are, whatever we've been, no matter who we are, we are by nature rebels against God.

We've done what that young man did to his father. We've done that to God. Now, we can, of course, be rebels in different ways.

[20:49] Think of two. We could be respectable rebels. You know how vice is wrong done against a person. Crime is wrong done against the state.

Sin is wrong done against God. If you're a respectable rebel, you don't do vice. You don't hurt other people. You know, you don't abuse them in any way.

If you're a respectable rebel, you don't do crime. You know, you don't break into homes and burgle them. You don't steal cars. You don't break the law of the land. You know, you're a good person.

You know, you behave well. You pay your taxes. You give the charity. Come to church. You live outwardly in all the ways you behave in all the ways that, you know, the Bible says Christians ought to behave.

Your family, your neighbors. Think you're a good person because you are a good person. Best of a citizen. But the problem is because God has never been Lord of your life.

[21:53] You're what C.S. Lewis calls a semi-believer. Some of you will know the name Bono. He's a lead singer of U2.

That wonderful Irish pop group. He's made millions of pounds. And he's given millions away to charity.

He's a very generous man. But he said on one occasion, he said, I wish I could live up to the idea of Christianity. It's like I'm a fan. I'm just not actually in the band.

You know, there are a lot of folk like that. They sit kind of, a C.S. Lewis, it's like semi-detached from God. He has a bit, you know, they do some bits, but they don't really do it.

The famous Baptist preacher, C.H. Spurgeon, said about such people. He said they would allow a God, but he must not be king. Now, we read the parable of the Pharisee and the public, and the second of the two readings there, because that's a brilliant illustration.

[23:06] The Pharisee, you see, compares himself with other people. And comparing himself with other people, you know, we could do that, couldn't we?

I mean, I could do that. I could compare myself, you know, if I was, I'd say, wow, you know, I don't beat my wife, you know, I don't get drunk and fight with people. I don't, you know, I don't steal from folk, you know.

I'm a pretty good citizen. But the publican, he compared himself with God's standards.

And if I compare myself with God's standards, I know that I'm sinful and unworthy of his love and his care.

You don't have to live riotously to be a rebel against God. You just have to be one of those people who's never actually gone home and confessed to being a sinner.

[24 : 11] But of course, you could be an obvious sinner, you know, like the young man in this story. You could make it clear you don't want anything to do with God, his standards, his values, the way of it, you know, church.

Well, it's boring, it's colorless, it's shallow, it's for kill joys. Rather follow the trends and the fashions of the world. Despite, despite the number of testimonies that doing that, like this young man, you know, leads to disaster.

The George Kipling, the English poet, talked about people who, you know, do that. They follow the trends and the fashions. He said, you know, they're seeking after the noise that men call fame.

The dross they think is gold. The tennis player Boris Becker, when he was at the height of his fame, wrote that, you know, he had homes on three continents.

He had more money than he knew what to do with at that time. He had women all clamouring for his company. But he said, I was empty inside.

[25 : 28] Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian dissident. After he had lived for a while here in the West and surveyed religion. He's awarded a great prize for progress in religion.

And his conclusion at the end of it all, when he surveyed all that was going on in the world. He said, I am unable to find anything more accurate or precise than the words I heard as a child from my grandparents.

This is all happened because the people have forgotten God. As this new year begins, whoever you are, whatever your past has been, respectable or not, God, the living God, longs to have a personal, genuine, growing relationship with you.

And he's waiting. He's waiting for you to come from that far country, wherever it has been. Because when we live without him, we ruin our relationship with him.

The penny needs to drop and we need to come to ourselves and understand that. And then we need to come back to him. And he's waiting to rescue you, me, everyone, everyone.

[26 : 59] He's waiting to embrace and forgive and restore, as the Father did with that young man. He's waiting to hear you say, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I'm not worthy to be your son.

He wants to hear that. Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word and for all that it teaches us of your love and your own feeling grace. And we pray that as this new year begins, we would make you the great object of our affection and our love.

And our Father, we just pray that we all may know what it is to have our sins forgiven, new life put within our souls, and then to live in peace and joy with you.

In Jesus' name we ask this. Amen.