



THE WHITBY FOUNDATION

GOSPEL-SHAPED RELATIONSHIPS

Seven Biblical Principles for Exposing the Root and Transforming the Fruit

A teaching guide for marriage, family relationships, counseling preparation, and discipleship

SELECTED SCRIPTURES

CENTRAL THESIS

No relationship can consistently reflect the gospel while truth, repentance, humility, confession, wisdom, and self-examination are absent. When both people practice these principles, even deeply damaged relationships can experience meaningful transformation.

MAKING FAMILIES STRONGER

Introduction: What These Principles Can and Cannot Promise

These principles can transform any person and create the conditions for relational transformation, but they do not guarantee that every relationship will be restored. A relationship requires participation from more than one person. One person may repent, renew the mind, confess sin, pursue truth, and walk in love. That may deeply change the relationship, but it cannot force the other person to become honest, safe, repentant, or reconciled.

The gospel guarantees the transformation of those who submit to Christ. It does not guarantee that every relationship will remain intact. Therefore, the goal of this teaching is not to promise automatic reconciliation, but to identify the biblical conditions under which relationships can become truthful, accountable, healing, and Christlike.

I. Agreement: We Cannot Walk Together While Living in Competing Realities

“Do two walk together, unless they have agreed to meet?” — Amos 3:3

Theological Clarification

Amos 3:3 is not primarily a marriage or relationship verse. In context, God is explaining that Israel’s judgment is not accidental: God and Israel are no longer walking in covenant harmony because Israel has rebelled. The relational principle still applies: two people cannot move in the same direction while refusing to acknowledge the same basic reality.

- Agreement does not require identical personalities, memories, or emotional reactions.
- Agreement does not mean that one person must surrender discernment to the other.
- Agreement means enough shared truth to identify what happened, what pattern is repeating, what belongs to each person, what harm occurred, and what God requires next.

Relational Principle: A relationship cannot heal what its members refuse to name.

Example

A spouse withdraws during conflict because confrontation feels dangerous. The other spouse experiences the withdrawal as rejection. A shared statement may be: “You were trying to protect yourself, and your withdrawal still left me alone. Your intent and my experience are both relevant.”

Root Questions

1. What facts do we both agree occurred?
2. Where are we confusing feelings with facts?
3. What recurring cycle can we both identify?
4. What part of the cycle belongs to me?
5. Am I seeking mutual understanding, or demanding that the other person adopt my interpretation?
6. Is there enough agreement about reality to make repair possible?

2. Truth: Freedom Requires More Than Sincerity

“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” — John 8:32

Theological Clarification

Jesus is saying more than “honesty brings freedom.” In context, the truth that frees is known through abiding in Christ’s word. Relational truth must therefore be governed by the truth of the gospel: God is holy, we are sinners, Christ saves, grace does not erase truth, forgiveness does not remove accountability, love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, and repentance produces fruit.

Relational Principle: Relationships remain bound when people protect a preferred narrative instead of submitting to truth.

Common Distortions

- “I feel unsafe, therefore you are unsafe.”
- “I did not intend harm, therefore no harm occurred.”
- “I apologized, therefore you must trust me.”
- “You reacted badly, therefore my behavior was justified.”
- “I am the victim, therefore I have no responsibility.”

Example

Instead of saying, “You never listen to me,” identify what can be examined: “During the last three conversations, you interrupted before I finished and responded before asking what I meant.”

Root Questions

1. What do I know, and what am I assuming?
2. What evidence supports my conclusion?
3. Am I telling the entire truth or only the portion that protects me?
4. Am I using my intention to dismiss the other person’s experience?
5. Am I using my pain to excuse my behavior?
6. What truth about Christ, myself, or the other person am I resisting?

3. Renewal: Lasting Change Begins in the Mind

“Be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” — Romans 12:2

Theological Clarification

Biblical transformation is not merely behavior management. The renewed mind learns to discern the will of God. Harmful behavior often follows a sequence: distorted belief, disordered interpretation, emotional reaction, and destructive behavior.

Relational Principle: Repeated fruit usually grows from repeated beliefs.

Fruit and Root

Visible Fruit	Possible Root
Anger or control	"I am not safe unless I control the outcome."
Defensiveness	"If I admit fault, I will lose power or be rejected."
Withdrawal	"Conflict means the relationship is failing."
Accusation	"My emotional interpretation must be true."
People-pleasing	"I must keep everyone happy to remain secure."

Example

The thought "She disagreed with me, so she does not respect me" may produce anger and control. A renewed interpretation is: "Disagreement may feel threatening, but disagreement alone does not prove disrespect. I should ask questions before assigning motives."

Root Questions

1. What did I make this event mean?
2. What belief produced my reaction?
3. Is that belief biblically true?
4. What am I afraid will happen?
5. Am I agreeing with God, or with fear, shame, pride, or accusation?
6. What new thought would produce godly fruit?
7. What behavior would demonstrate that my mind is actually being renewed?

4. Knowledge and Wisdom: Do Not Make Conclusions From Feelings Alone

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." — Hosea 4:6

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding." — Proverbs 3:5

Theological Clarification

Hosea 4:6 does not teach that every problem exists because people lack information. In context, Israel had rejected the knowledge of God. Proverbs 3 does not forbid thinking; it warns against treating our limited perspective as final authority.

Relational Principle: Wisdom requires humility about the limits of our interpretation.

Four Levels to Separate

Level	Example
Observation	"You did not respond for six hours."

Level	Example
Interpretation	"You were ignoring me."
Emotion	"I felt anxious and unimportant."
Conclusion	"You do not care about me."

Example

Instead of saying, "You were trying to punish me," say: "When you stopped speaking to me, I experienced it as punishment. What was happening for you?"

Root Questions

1. What did I directly observe?
2. What did I infer?
3. What emotion influenced my conclusion?
4. Have I asked before assuming motive?
5. Am I seeking wisdom or merely confirmation?
6. What information might contradict my current interpretation?
7. Would a neutral observer reach the same conclusion?
8. Am I willing to revise my view?

5. Confession: Healing Requires Bringing Sin Into the Light

"Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed." — James 5:16

Theological Clarification

James places confession within a praying Christian community. The text does not mean every private sin must be publicly announced to everyone. Confession should be appropriately directed.

- Sin against God must be confessed to God.
- Sin against another person should ordinarily be confessed to that person.
- Entrenched or enslaving sin may also require confession to mature believers for prayer and accountability.
- Public sin may sometimes require public acknowledgment.

Relational Principle: What remains concealed cannot be relationally repaired.

Weak and Strong Confession

Weak Confession	Stronger Confession
"I am sorry you felt hurt, but I was overwhelmed."	"I spoke harshly, interrupted you, and assigned motives without asking questions. That was sinful and disrespectful. Being overwhelmed explains my state, but it does not excuse what I did. I am sorry. Next time I need to pause rather than attack."

Root Questions

1. What exactly did I do?
2. Have I named it without softening it?
3. Am I confessing, or defending myself?
4. Have I acknowledged impact without arguing about intent?
1. Am I concealing information because I fear consequences?
2. Have I confessed to the person I wronged?
3. What restitution or changed behavior is necessary?
4. Is there observable fruit consistent with repentance?

6. Self-Examination: Remove the Log Before Correcting the Speck

“First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” — Matthew 7:5

Theological Clarification

Jesus does not forbid all moral judgment. He forbids hypocritical, self-exalting, and distorted judgment. The command is not “Never address another person’s sin,” but “Address your own sin first so that you can see clearly and help humbly.”

Relational Principle: Gospel correction begins with personal repentance, not prosecuting the other person.

Example

A spouse complains that the other person is defensive but refuses to examine an accusatory tone. A self-examining response is: “Your defensiveness is a real issue, but I also approached you as though I already knew your motives. My accusation made honest conversation harder.”

Root Questions

1. What part of this conflict belongs to me?
2. What am I demanding from the other person that I am unwilling to practice?
3. Am I using their sin to avoid confronting mine?
4. Would I describe my own behavior as severely as I describe theirs?
5. Have I repented before attempting to correct?
6. Am I seeking restoration or victory?
7. Can I address wrongdoing without contempt?

7. Measure: The Standard We Use Reveals the Condition of Our Heart

“With the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.”
— Matthew 7:2

Theological Clarification

This warning concerns hypocritical and merciless judgment. Jesus exposes the tendency to apply strict standards to others while demanding understanding, context, and grace for ourselves.

Relational Principle: Unhealthy relationships use two different scales—maximum context for me and minimum context for you.

The Double Standard

What We Say About Ourselves	What We Say About Others
“I was tired.”	“You are selfish.”
“I was triggered.”	“You always do this.”
“That was not my intention.”	“That shows who you really are.”
“You know my heart.”	“There is no excuse.”
“I had a difficult childhood.”	“You should know better.”

Root Questions

1. Am I giving myself explanations while giving the other person labels?
2. Do I require perfection from others but ask for patience with myself?
3. Is my standard consistent?
4. Am I interpreting myself by intention and others by impact?
5. Am I interpreting myself by context and others by character?
6. What would truthful mercy look like here?

The Root-to-Fruit Framework

Use this sequence for personal reflection, marriage conversations, counseling preparation, or discipleship. The goal is to move beneath visible behavior and identify the belief, fear, desire, or wound producing it.

1. **Fruit** What behavior occurred? “I yelled, withdrew, accused, lied, controlled, interrupted, or shut down.”
2. **Interpretation** What did I tell myself about the event? “I believed I was being rejected, controlled, ignored, or disrespected.”
3. **Root** What fear, desire, wound, or belief was underneath? “I feared abandonment. I needed to be right. I wanted control.”
4. **Truth** What does God say that corrects or reorders this belief? “I am secure in Christ. I am responsible for my conduct. I do not know another person’s heart.”

5. Confession What must I confess without blaming? “I accused you without evidence and used my fear to justify it.”

6. Repair What action would demonstrate repentance? “I will ask questions before assigning motives and pause when I become flooded.”

7. Fruit Over Time What observable change should eventually appear? More curiosity, truthfulness, patience, consistency, humility, safety, and self-control.

Teaching Summary: Seven Marks of a Gospel-Shaped Relationship

1. Shared truth: We name reality honestly enough to walk together.
2. Submission to Christ: We allow God’s truth to correct our personal narratives.
3. Renewed thinking: We examine the beliefs producing destructive behavior.
4. Humble wisdom: We distinguish facts from feelings and interpretations.
5. Honest confession: We bring sin into the light and accept its consequences.
6. Self-examination: We confront our own sin before correcting another person.
7. Consistent measures: We apply truth, accountability, and mercy fairly.

Important Guardrails

- Trauma language should illuminate suffering and patterns without replacing biblical categories such as sin, wisdom, responsibility, repentance, limitation, and danger.
- Understanding the root of a behavior does not excuse its fruit.
- Forgiveness does not automatically restore trust, remove consequences, or require immediate reconciliation.
- One person’s repentance can transform that person and alter the relational system, but it cannot compel another person’s participation.
- Biblical love is truthful and merciful; it is neither enabling nor condemning.

Conclusion

These principles do not guarantee that every relationship will continue, but without them no relationship can mature into a durable, truthful reflection of the gospel. When both people practice them sincerely, the deepest relational cycles can be exposed, interrupted, and transformed.

A relationship can still fail when one person refuses truth, remains unsafe, conceals sin, rejects repentance, repeatedly violates boundaries, or refuses participation. The faithful goal is therefore not control over the outcome, but submission to Christ in the process.

Final Reflection Am I asking God to change the relationship while resisting the truth, confession, repentance, humility, and renewed thinking through which He ordinarily changes people?