

The Space Between Us

Week 1: Closing the Gap

Philippians 2:1-11

As we get started this morning, I want you to think about this question...on a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate the overall health of your relationships? Don't answer out loud. That could create some awkwardness if you're like, "8!" and the person next to you's like, "3!" We don't want that.

How healthy are your relationships? And, this isn't just about marriage, if you're married. I'm talking about any relationship you're in. Friends, neighbors, co-workers, roommate, business partner, family...how healthy are your relationships?

We're kicking off a new series today called The Space Between Us. We spent the last month looking at our relationship with money, which is a stress point in a lot of our lives. And, for many of us, our relationship with others is right up there, too. You may have some healthy relationships in your life where things are going well and you get along, but we all have those relationships that we wish could be better.

- Maybe there's some tension around unresolved conflict. Something happened and it's just not been the same.
- Maybe there was an argument and, instead of working it out, you both just swept it underneath the rug, hoping it would go away, but the dirt's still there.
- Maybe there are people you're holding a grudge against, or they hurt you so deeply that you're not sure you'll ever be able to forgive them, or trust anyone else again.
- Maybe you're afraid that if you own up to what you did, the other person won't love you anymore, and so you hide in guilt and shame, or you deflect the blame, play the victim, and it's driving a wedge in your relationship in ways you don't even realize.

When things like this happen, it creates space between us. There's this gap that forms and it weighs on our hearts and our minds. That space has a way of consuming us and keeping us up at night, wishing things could be better. Maybe replaying what happened over and over in our minds.

There's a heaviness that we feel when there's a gap in a relationship and space between us and someone we love. It's why a friend of mine out in Colorado always says, "We're only as happy as our relationships are healthy."

When there's space between us, it takes a toll on our lives. It effects our mental and emotional health, our bodies, even our spiritual health. Fortunately, God's Word gives us wisdom for life. It speaks to anything we face, including how we can form and maintain healthy relationships.

So, that's what we are looking at this month. But, for today, our text is Philippians 2, so if you have a Bible, or a Bible app you like to use, turn there with me.

And I hope that what we'll see in our time together this morning is that **The gospel gives us the power to close the space between us.** The Gospel...the good news of who Jesus is and what he's done for us and how it completely transforms us...the gospel, and a life that is shaped by it, gives us the power to close the gaps that can form between us.

Now, this letter that we're looking at today to the church in Philippi, if you're a student of Scripture, the first word that probably comes to mind when you hear Philippians is joy. And, certainly, Paul's joy, in spite of his circumstances, is evident in these four chapters. But, there's another reason why Paul writes **this** letter to **this** church at **this** time.

He's heard there's some conflict going on within the church. Can you believe it?! Church people aren't getting along! So glad we've grown out of that! So, there's some conflict, and he even calls out two of the people involved in chapter 4, though it's probably unfair to pin it all on these two ladies. Either way, some gaps have formed in the relationships within the church. There's some space between these early followers of Jesus that's been filled by anger and bitterness and resentment...

And so, Paul writes this letter that is as much about **unity** as it is joy. But, the two kinda go hand in hand, don't they? When your relationships are healthy, it definitely brings a certain amount of joy to your life. We're only as happy as our relationships are healthy. And, in our text, Paul lays out how we can experience the joy of healthy relationships, and it's completely opposite of the advice we see around us! Look at what he says towards the end of chapter 1. **Phil 1:27...(READ)**

Earlier in chapter 1, Paul talks about being in chains for Christ and the real possibility that he's going to lose his life at the hands of the Jewish leaders and Roman government. That's going to create a MAJOR gap between this church that loves Paul and those who demand his life because of his faith. But notice, Paul says, "Stand firm in the ONE Spirit." "Strive together as ONE for the faith of the gospel." And, whatever happens to me, "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."

That phrase, **"conduct yourselves" it's one word in Greek, a political word that means Citizenship.** Paul's saying, "Whatever happens to me, and whatever gap it creates between you and the people who carry it out, don't conduct yourselves as Romans or Philippians, but as followers of Jesus and citizens of Heaven, because that's who you are through the Gospel of Christ! So, live like that."

In other words, don't mimic the way the world handles conflict. Don't seek revenge, hold a grudge, get even. Don't try to settle the score. If you have an issue with someone, don't go into an outburst of anger, talk badly about them, rant on social media... Don't mimic the way the world handles conflict because by the grace of God and the power of the Gospel at work in you,

you're not a citizen of this world. You're a citizen of Heaven, so mimic Jesus and follow His example.

So, how does a citizen of Heaven and follower of Jesus handle conflict and the gap it creates? Look at chapter 2, verse 1...(READ Phil. 2:1-4)

Paul's like, "Listen, if Jesus has done anything in you or for you...if you are united to Him...it ought to be seen in the way you treat others. The way you live with them. Even in the way you handle conflict with them." If we've been transformed by the Gospel, the gap in our vertical relationship with the Father has been closed. That ought to have an effect on our horizontal relationships, too.

Our love for Jesus and each other, even our enemies, ought to drive us towards closing the gaps that form between us. The world says to make them wider, but the Gospel compels us to close them. The Gospel compels us to strive for the good of others, not just ourselves. It compels us to be like-minded, which literally means to "*mind the same things*." So, when there's a gap between us, we work it out together. The Gospel compels us to look after the interests of others. Paul's not saying we shouldn't look out for our own interests, too, he's saying, just **Make sure your concern is wide enough to include others, not just yourself.**

The truth is, space will grow and gaps will form in every relationship we're in, but we can keep them narrow by following Paul's wisdom. By pursuing unity, and the good of others, and practicing humility, and valuing others and their interests, too. Some really practical byproducts of this kind of life is listening to understand instead of trying to be understood. Empathy. Trying to really feel with people and the pain they're experiencing, maybe even because of our own actions. Doing the right thing for the other person, even if it's hard.

And, we may look at that and say, "That's impossible" and then Paul pulls out his trump card and points to Jesus as our example. And, as I read, listen for characteristics that Jesus displayed that might help us when it comes to closing the gaps that form between us...(READ Phil 2:5-11)

This early Christian hymn captures the Gospel so beautifully and it gives us a model, based on Jesus, for what to do when there's space between us.

Followers of Jesus who want to close the gaps in their relationships:

1) Think of others – Jesus didn't hang on to his rights as God and the things he deserved. Instead, he laid them down for us. He put us first. If we want healthy relationships, we have to think of the needs of others, not just our own. We have to be willing to, at times, lay down our own rights for the good of another person, or even the relationship.

2) Serve others – Jesus made himself nothing and served. He was humble. True humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less and any healthy relationship will require you to think of yourself less.

3) Sacrifice for others – Jesus laid down his life. Sacrificing for the sake of a relationship may mean laying down my pride and confessing my mistake. Owning responsibility instead of deflecting it. It might mean choosing to forgive, even though the pain is deep and I might have to choose it again and again.

This is not the way the world treats those who have hurt them. Who have created a gap. It's not the way of the world, but it is the way of Jesus. And, when we follow His way, we...

4) Glorify God – We glorify God by being obedient to him, just as Jesus was. By following His ways and wisdom over our own. Paul says when we allow the Gospel to inform how we handle conflict and let its power close even the widest gaps that form between us, **"Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life"** (Phil 2:15b-16a).

So, how can we actually live this out? I want to touch on just a couple of things as we wrap up and then we're going to get super practical in the rest of this series. But again, if we truly want to close the gaps that form between us, the Gospel is our model. It not only gives us the power to close the space between us, but it shows us how to do it. And, it comes down to the word "Reconciliation."

2 Corinthians 5:18 says that God reconciled us to himself through Christ. **Romans 5:1** says, since we have been justified (made just-as-if-we'd never sinned) through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Through Jesus, and our faith in Him, God reconciles us, he brings us back into a right relationship with him. Because of our sin, there is animosity between us and God. There's a gap that exists and space between us, but we can find peace and reconciliation in Jesus.

There's three things that come together to make that happen. Confession – admitting our sin and our need for forgiveness. Repentance – turning from that sin pattern and towards a new relationship and way of life. Forgiveness – the offended person pardoning the action that created the gap. When you have those three things, you can experience reconciliation.

So, in our faith, **Confession + Repentance + Forgiveness = Reconciliation with God.** These three things come together to bring peace in our relationship with God. They close the gap caused by our sin. God alone made the way for it to happen through Jesus, but we respond in faith by confession and repentance.

But, listen, what's true in the Gospel and our relationship with God is also true in our relationship with others. For reconciliation to even be possible in our relationships, it takes **Confession + Repentance + Forgiveness = Reconciliation with each other.**

Here's what I mean...let's say I do something, intentionally or unintentionally, that hurts you. A gap is created. There's now space between us. If I ignore it, justify it, get defensive, keep doing it, turn the blame on you...if I do any of that, are we truly going to be reconciled? No? Can we

be amicable with each other? Kind or friendly? Maybe? But we can't be truly reconciled, even if you forgive me, because there will always be this unaddressed thing between us.

Or, if I'm like, "Hey, I'm so sorry for what I did. I know that was really hurtful and I promise to do better next time. Will you forgive me?" And you're like, "No." or "I'm just not there yet..." are we reconciled? No. There's still a gap between us.

True reconciliation requires confession. Taking responsibility for the harm that was done and the gap that was created and turning from it instead of continuing in it. It requires forgiveness and the courage to let go of the offense.

Disclaimer: I'm talking about ordinary, run of the mill offenses here. Things we all experience in our relationships. But I know that, in a room like this, there are people filtering what I'm saying through their experiences of abuse. There have been things done to you and you've been made to feel like you have to forgive and forget, not bring it up for the good of the family, just keep it to yourself, bury it. Someone may have even used faith to justify putting you in a harmful situation.

Reconciliation in cases like these looks much different than what we're talking about, but there are people who love you and want to help you work through what happened or is happening. If you need to talk to someone, please, please let us help. Find me, find someone here you feel like you can trust, and let us come alongside of you.

The greater point I'm trying to make for those ordinary gaps that appear is this: **Reconciliation is only possible when both people do their part.**

It's like if you and I got together to bake cookies. I said I'll bring the butter and sugar and chocolate chips and you'll bring the flour and baking soda and eggs. We can't actually make cookies unless we both add the ingredients we're holding. If you add yours, but I'm like, "Nope, I'm keeping mine to myself" we're not making cookies.

And, whenever there's a gap in a relationship, someone's holding the ingredients of confession and repentance and someone is holding forgiveness. Reconciliation is only possible when both people add their ingredients.

But, what if they don't? Short answer: **You cannot reconcile a relationship on your own. You can only add your part.** So, your goal in that situation is to do what you CAN do and make it possible for reconciliation to happen if/when the other person becomes willing to do their part, too.

We'll talk more about that in the coming weeks. But again, who's our example? It's Jesus. The Gospel is the perfect model of how we can close the gaps and the spaces that form between us.

Paul says in **Romans 5:8, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners...while there was still a gap between us and God, caused by our sin...Christ died for us."**

God added His ingredient to make the way for reconciliation with us hoping, one day, we will add ours, too.

Healthy relationships start and end with Jesus. The Gospel gives us the power to close the spaces that form between us, but it starts when we close the space between us and God through Jesus. And if you're ready to do that today...