

Hang Tough

(Last in the series: Building Great Relationships)

Text: Romans 8:31-39; I Cor. 13:7

6/27/10

I

How do you build great relationships? Answer: You learn to love! We've explored I Cor. 13:4-7 for wisdom on how to have what we desire, whether it's a deeper friendship, a stronger marriage, a more-unified family, or even co-worker relationships marked by kindness than dispute. And now we come to the last part of Paul's poem on how get along. He writes of love in verse 7...

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

As I was pondering the poetry, I began to think of an Oreo (which shows you how profound I really am.) It may have been divine inspiration. It more likely was an anticipation of lunch. Whatever the case I decided to go with it.

An Oreo works because of the way it hangs together. The crisp chocolate outside depends on the sweet cement of the soft and sticky inside. Likewise the soft center needs the protection and firmness of the crust. No center and it's just another crumbly cookie. No crust and it's just a gooey mess.

When it comes to love I think Paul is handing us a spiritual Oreo. The outside is the crust of "bearing all things" and "enduring all things." It's where relationships rub up against the raw realities of life.

And the center is the sweet cement of "believing all things" and "hoping all things". It's where relationships find the unexpected strength to hang tough and hang tight in a world that has so many ways to pull them apart.

II

Let's take good look at the outside of relationships built on love. They are not "ideal" because we do not meet each other in an ideal world. Real relationships have to "bear" some things and "endure" some others.

When "*love bears all things*" it means love carries things. Instead of leaving people to carry their own burdens, love is willing to help pick them up.

In a relationship defined by love we come alongside each other and take hold of the trouble that comes with living. We can't remove the sorrow of *grief*, but we can share the load in offering sympathy. We can't undo the shock of *losing your job*, but we can help soften the blow. We can't always relieve each others *physical pain*, but we can make sure our loved friends and friends don't suffer in solitude.

Love shares the load whether the weight is fruit of bad judgement, or the result of bad luck. Love grabs the handle of suitcase that is not ours and makes some of it our own. Love is the willingness to be hassled, bothered, and inconvenienced for the sake of other people.

And sometimes love simply has to endure, "survive" some things. Relationships are not ideal because we must have with people who are never "ideal". It takes courage to love the spouse who has betrayed your trust. It takes courage to love the friend who continues to sabotage their own health and well-being. It takes courage to love the child who over your protests messes up their life, again. It takes courage to continue love people in a place like Haiti that will soak up every ounce of compassion you give it, and still bleed for more.

We're so impressed by people who love this way. We think of the Mother Teresa's of the world who pour their hearts out to people in the worst places in the world. We marvel at the husband or wife who cares for the declining spouse, sometimes for decades. We are grateful for the one who doesn't turn away from their substance-addicted friend. We give thanks for the man or woman who gives up the high dollar career to teach kids in broke underperforming schools, or provide medical care to people in some rural clinic in some place nobody ever heard of.

How poor we would be without the tenacious lovers in this world, the one's that practice love with a tough crust. And how worried and wearied we become at the thought of becoming one. *Love bears all thing, love endures all things...*how is such a thing possible more than a day here or a week there?

Maybe this is a poem for somebody else, a creed for holy heroes of the faith, or at least those who are not yet tired enough to part with their idealism.

III

Well, as we said earlier the Oreo doesn't hang tough without a center. If the outside of love "bears and endures" the inside of love must "believe and hope".

Love "believes" first of all in the love of God. And love "hopes" first of all in the future of God.

If we would love each other tenaciously, sacrificially, in good times and in bad, for the long haul, we must believe we have been loved in such a way.

That seems to be the message that Paul was trying to get across in Romans 8. *What shall separate us from the love of God?* Not God...he gave his Son on our behalf; and though he was entitled to judge us, he justified us. Not Jesus...the one who could condemn us instead died for us, was raised for us, and now prays for us.

We'll what about the problems of this world – hardship, persecution, famine, poverty, war? No not those either. There's not a thing says Paul, not the future or the past, not whatever spiritual forces may exist in this world, not even death itself – none of these thing can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

Love makes believers of us. I'm not sure how meaningful faith in God is until is accompanied by the conviction that God's love for us is profound and unshakeable. If God is for us, who can be against us?

Love enables belief. And love results in hope. If I believe God in Christ loves me – in all my imperfection - now, there is every reason to hope in God's future later.

This isn't some flimsy hope, like I hope it won't rain tomorrow (which is really a way of saying you've got your doubts.) No, this hope is trust in God's future – redemption, resurrection, healing, fellowship – which is real, but not yet visible. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews said:

Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

The strength to hang tough with each other now depends on what we hope for later. Hope lets us live in the present because it has confidence in the future.

IV

A funny thing happens where there is profound belief and hope in the love of God. We begin to find ourselves believing in and hoping for the other people in our lives.

Love in the real world requires a generous amount of “bearing and enduring.” But that’s not all. It’s sweeter than that.

“Love believes all things.” When we believe God loves us lavishly in the midst of our imperfection, we might find ourselves beginning to lower our defenses around other people. Love isn’t stupid, or naïve. It doesn’t believe everything somebody tells it. Love knows other people make mistakes, show poor judgment, and sometimes lie. But love believes they are more than all those things. Love tempers our judgement, because through the love of Christ God tempered his judgement of us.

Love risks seeing people with whom we rub shoulders as having worth regardless of their moments of unworthy behavior. Love discerns the image of God in a brother or sister and chooses to always believe and hope for better things.

Why is it that the unrighteous people liked to see Jesus coming, and those confident of their righteousness and swift to judge, didn’t? Was it because Jesus was a moral sloth with low standards and no expectations? Or was it because “love believes all things” and Jesus chose to believe more in what they were and less in what they weren’t? (And they knew it.)

It’s naïve to say there is no room for making judgements about people in our lives. Sometimes justice and truth require it. But it’s awfully hard to have a good relationship with somebody when you are always playing the judge.

And because love “believes all things” even to the point of looking foolish, love also “hopes all things” about people when logically there isn’t much to be hopeful about.

Love still hopes for the renewal or reconciliation of a relationship after the due date has passed. It doesn’t lose site of the final victory of Jesus Christ. It chooses to believe that all things are possible with God even if all things aren’t likely. It leaves the light on and door cracked even if hand we hope will open it never seems to come.

Hang tough. Nothing less than tenacious love will get it done. And nothing less than a believing and hopeful love will make it possible.

Years ago, a Johns Hopkins professor gave a group of graduate students this assignment: Go to the slums. Take 200 boys, between the ages of 12 and 16, and investigate their background and environment. Then predict their chances for the future.

The students, after consulting social statistics, talking to the boys and compiling much data, concluded that 90 percent of the boys would spend some time in jail.

Twenty-five years later, another group of graduate students was given the job of testing the prediction. They went back to the same area. Some of the boys - by then men - were still there, a few had died, some had moved away, but they got in touch with 180 of the original 200. They found that only four of the group had ever been sent to jail.

Why was it that these men, who had lived in a breeding place of crime, had such a surprisingly good record? The researchers were continually told: "Well, there was a teacher ..."

They pressed further and found that in 75 percent of the cases it was the same woman. The researchers went to this teacher, now living in a home for retired teachers. How had she exerted this remarkable influence over that group of children? Could she give them any reason why these boys should have remembered her?

"No," she said, "no, I really couldn't." And then, thinking back over the years, she said musingly, more to herself than to her questioners: "I loved those boys. ..."