

When Two Fools Collide
Delivered at Washington Community Fellowship
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[Kenny Rogers and Dottie West singing –<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFcAx3OnBJI>]

You want things your way
And I want them mine,
And now we don't know
Just where to draw the line.
How long can love survive
If we keep choosing sides,
And who picks up the pieces
Every time two fools collide?

You lay the blame on me
And I, the blame on you,
But why do we keep finding faults
In everything we do?
And how long can we keep right and wrongs
So cut and dry,
And who picks up the pieces
Every time two fools collide?

We can save our love,
We still have the time,
Oh, I know there must be a way,
But we still haven't tried,
To keep our hearts from breaking
Every time two fools collide.

Life is a series of relationships. Relationships, when they are good, they are very, very good, but when they are bad they are horrid. The misery of broken relationships is far more intense than the happiness of united hearts, because we expect relationships to make us happy. And when they don't, not only are we forced to deal with those interpersonal issues –we're left disappointed and disillusioned about relationships in general. As the old Dottie West and Kenny Rogers song asks, "Who'll pick up the pieces every time two fools collide?"

It is an undisputable fact that relationships do go awry. And that should not surprise us. Sin didn't just rupture our relationship with God, it drove a wedge between us and others as well. Immediately after Adam and Eve sinned together, they began the blame game. And in the next chapter one of their sons kills the other. As a result of that sinful legacy, we have the capacity be loving or to deal selfishly and callously with those around us.

If we can oversimplify this interpersonal dynamic for the sake of illustration, let's characterize our interactions as simply positive or negative. That means that there are three basic types of engagement possible, and I direct your attention to the diagrams below, where these possibilities are depicted. When we deal with others lovingly and they love us in return, life is wonderful. It puts a skip in our step and a song in our hearts.

$$+ \text{ and } + = \text{😊} !$$

But, in a sinful world, we do not live on this plane every day. Sometimes one person is trying to love and the other is being selfish or cruel, or perhaps each contributes a mixture of positive and negative relational energy. The possible permutations are endless. So, then, depending on the circumstances, the positive force might pull the other back into a healthy orbit. Or perhaps the negative force will drag the relationship into a downward spiral. The chances for a foolish fender-bender is significant.

$$+ \text{ and } - = \uparrow \downarrow$$

The third illustration shows what happens when two sinful, dysfunctional people unleash their negativity on each other. That's right, two fools collide—head-on. This is the disastrous synergy of two sets of sinfulness. And that collision can erupt into a demolition derby. Who will win? Typically, nobody .

$$- \text{ and } - = \text{💥}$$

Now I know that none of you good, Christian people have ever had any relational crashes, but you just might have a “friend” who could use some advice in this area. So, as we bring this series on transformation to a close, I thought we'd spend some time talking this morning about how to transform relationships—what to do when two fools collide.

Sometimes people come to me, looking for help with their relationships. Until they speak I don't know whether the problem is with their spouse, with their lack of spouse, with

their children, with their co-workers, with someone else in the church, or with some other kind of relationship. But, before they say a word, I do have a pretty good idea what they're going to say about that relationship.

The vast majority of the time whatever is wrong is mostly the fault of the other individual, and my counselee wants me to help them figure out how to change that person. So, now we have a problem. The individual sitting in front of me desires change. But their assumptions about how that change occurs in the Kingdom of God are absolutely inimical to spiritual transformation.

The possibility does exist for them to invoke the power of God in that relationship, but not by remotely projecting influence over the absent protagonist. God wants work into that relationship by transforming the person who recognizes the problem. And when they find that out, their enthusiasm for counseling drops off dramatically. And sometimes they look at me with that "I'll bet you flunked psychology, and it's a good thing I'm not paying for this advice look."

They want the magic formula for manipulating someone else into seeing things and doing things their way. But even God didn't have much luck with that approach. Remember the law? It set clear boundaries and gave people a series of rewards and punishments to encourage them to follow the program. But it didn't work. It could not overcome human sinfulness nor draw people into the relationship God wanted them to have with him.

So, God tried a different tack. He became one of us and identified with our sin and took it upon himself and acted sacrificially to draw us rather than to manipulate us to himself. And, guess what? He has far more followers now than he ever did then.

The example of the way that Christ came to reconcile us to God ought to give us a clue as to how God wants to heal our horizontal relationships as well. And he's also given us quite a lot of Scriptural direction. So, to help us talk about a transformed response to relational collisions, I've folded this instruction together and dubbed it the *humserfessenergy* principle. I know, it sounds like something from a German automobile ad. And it might not be the most clever mnemonic device ever.

But if you take a look at the term on your handout, you'll see how it breaks down into its constituent parts. We're talking about a combination of humility, service, confession, listener, and mercy—like I said, *humserfessenergy*. And, yet, in order to truly transform

relationships, these elements must work together as a package, a package for which there was no name—until now.

Humserfessenercy is reflected in Colossians 3:12 and other texts: “Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

We'll explain that principle in greater detail as we go along. But, first, let's contrast what we *ought* to do with what we *usually* do. And I'm calling what we usually do *selfrightmentulation*. Perhaps you're not familiar with this neologism, either. But I have every confidence that you'll know exactly what I'm talking about when you see what it means—selfishness, rights, judgment, and manipulation.

Let me give you an example of how *selfrightmentulation* works from a little incident that happened at our house this week. On Monday we had just sat down to dinner, when the phone rang. It was for Cindi. She spent a good while chatting and then returned. I had eaten most of my dinner. Hers must have been lukewarm.

Fast forward to Tuesday night. We're about to do pizza and salad in the living room, while watching the pre-game warmup for the State of the Union speech. Cindi was still holding the hot pizza and the knife, when the phone rang. I cut the pizza and waited for her to finish up. But she wasn't finishing up. Finally, the call ended. But before she could take two steps toward the living room it rang again. Another engaging conversation.

Some people like cold pizza. I am not one of them. So, for the second day in a row, I was almost finished when she joined me for dinner. I looked at her and said, “I don't care what you do, but if we've already sat down to eat when the phone rings, I'm just going to go ahead and eat.” She acknowledged what I'd said in a way that made me think she got the point, but I didn't leave well enough alone. “You know, it's actually kind of rude,” I added.

At that point two things could happen. Cindi could agree with my accusation and capitulate to my indirect ultimatum, or she could take umbrage at either my indictment or my manner or both. Fortunately, she chose to be gracious. Otherwise, we could be looking at a major two-fool collision.

The next day I was working on this sermon. And as I plotted out the constituent elements of *selfrightmentulation*, I realized that I had employed each and every one of them, pretty much in order, only a few hours earlier. First, I focused on myself and how that situation affected me. Then, I got upset because my right to attention was being violated. Then I engaged in judgment of Cindi's behavior. And, finally, I set what was supposed to sound like a personal boundary but was actually a not-so-subtle attempt at manipulation.

Now, when I created the term *selfrightmentulation*, I was not actually thinking of applying it to myself, let alone becoming its poster child. So, the next day I had to go back to Cindi and apologize for so unkindly botching that whole incident in textbook fashion. Now, I think everything is okay. We'll find out the next time the phone rings during dinner.

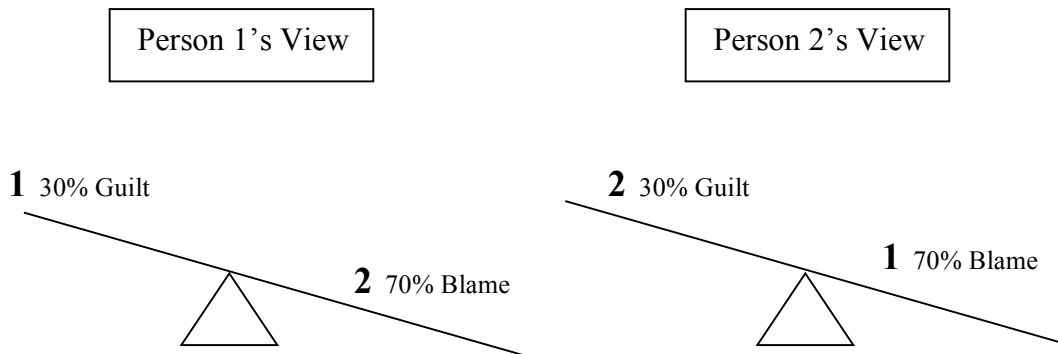
Perhaps my very personal illustration of *selfrightmentulation* seems eerily familiar. Which might be because this term describes not only the wrong way to react to interpersonal challenges but perhaps the most common way as well. But, thank God, there is a better way. It is, I'll grant, far less intuitive to the sinful mind. But it is the way God has prescribed.

This approach that heals hurts and transforms relationships is what we have dubbed *humserfessenergy*. Let's take it piece by piece. When a relationship breaks down, we must approach the other person with a humility that draws people in, by showing interest in their point of view and asking questions rather than issuing ultimatums. And it precludes a high-handed smugness that only hardens the two parties into their respective attitudes. Had I simply asked Cindi how she thought we should handle dinnertime phone calls, she probably would have agreed with me, and, end of story.

When conflicts arise, the answer is not to oppose the opposition but to respond with humble *service* that shows an interest in the other party. Matthew 5:40: "If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles." Luke 6:27-28 adds: "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

Nothing deflates antagonism faster than your antagonist acting on your behalf, trying to satisfy your needs. This non-retaliatory response is both surprising and transformational.

Confession is an extremely important aspect of humserfessenercy. Now, you may not always have something to confess. But in most conflicts both parties bear a measure of responsibility. What typically happens, however, is that we have differing perspectives about where that blame lies, as illustrated below.



As the song says, “You put the blame on me, and I the blame on you.” And we feel responsibility or guilt only for the part of the problem that we don’t blame the other person for. In most conflicts there’s no referee to sort it all out, so we remain prisoners of our own self-protective subjectivity.

In our hypothetical illustration, person 1 feels responsible for only 30% of the problem, while blaming 70% on person 2. Interestingly enough, person 2 sees the balance of blame exactly in the same proportion, except that it is person 1 who is the main culprit. I’m sure that none of you have ever been here before.

Some of us think that the only way out of this situation is to adjudicate the true balance. Maybe you do that by seeing who yells louder, by who caves first, by who is the more able advocate, or by who best manages to revise the history that led to the disagreement. Let me say this as delicately as I know how. This dumber than *Jackass, the Movie*. It’s like *Jackass, the Play at Home Version*.

Here’s a little secret. The real question is not who bears what percentage of the blame. Or who started it. The real question is who will step up and break the impasse.

Notice the illustration of the lever. When you take responsibility for your actions and for the hurt you have caused to the other person, you’re not taking responsibility for a certain percentage of the problem. You’re asking their forgiveness for what you did, period.

That cannot be a conditional confession, as in “If I did X, Y, or Z.” It must be your sincere remorse for having done X, Y, or Z and for having hurt them in whatever ways they feel hurt. It’s not, “I’ll own up to this if you’ll own up to that.” No. It can’t be, “I’m sorry but.” It must be an unconditional confession.

What is the most likely thing that the other individual is going to say in return? Of course. The three hardest words to say are, “I was wrong.” Two of the easiest are, “Me too.”

Even if that’s not the immediate response, it’ll probably happen soon. Why? Because the teeter-totter comes crashing down on their side. Even if they thought their responsibility was only 30%. Because once they grant you forgiveness they can’t balance their guilt with your blame. It’s just amazing how the most recalcitrant opposition turns to mush.

A soft answer really does turn away wrath. And there is no softer answer than that prescribed by James, the brother of our Lord: “Confess your sins to each other.” So simple, yet so hard.

Have you ever seen an accident after which the two parties get out and just scream at each other? That’s just about what happens when two fools collide as well. Everyone is talking—or yelling—but no one is... listening.

Tucked into the transforming principle of humserfessenergy is a tribute to the word *listener*. Why do we think we can mend whatever is broken in a relationship by expressing our opinion, when it was probably our opinion that created the problem in the first place? That’s like trying to put out a gasoline fire by dousing it with gasoline.

I’ve yet to see a rift develop between two people because they listened to each other too much. But a lot of healing can come through listening. James, the wise biblical writer I quoted a moment ago, had this to say in James 1:19: “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” And you know what? There just might be a connection between the three activities—being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.

People who have received an understanding hearing are unlikely to be angry. Heated talk typically increases the pressure by filling the conflict with hot air. But as soon as we stop and listen, the escalation of tension stops.

I'm not talking about listening solely in order to prepare a rebuttal. I'm not talking about listening just because you're waiting your turn. I'm talking about listening with a view to understanding.

Because, when you truly listen two things happen. First, the other person becomes more amenable to dialog. And, second, it helps you to know how to fix the problem from his or her point of view, which is where healing and reconciliation must begin.

Mercy is the final aspect of our transforming principle of *humserfessenergy*. Mercy is when you refrain from exacting justice. But when conflict arises we gravitate toward justice, because we're sure that if justice had its way, then the other person would quit being a jerk and all would be well.

Luke 6:36 tells us that we should imitate God's mercy by being merciful to others. This is not an optional aspect of Christian spirituality, though we treat it as if it were. In the passage we read earlier from Colossians 3, it tells us to forgive just as God has forgiven us. And God has freely and graciously forgiven us. But when someone has wronged us, we're not so inclined to let them off the hook.

The truth is that others should not have to ask you for forgiveness. I don't mean, of course, that they shouldn't ask; the relationship may not progress until they do. What I mean is that before they ask you should have already forgiven them. When you can ask forgiveness for your own role in the problem and unilaterally forgive others, then you are free. There is no more issue to be resolved, only a relationship to be restored.

While there is unquestionably biblical sanction for the *humserfessenergy* principle, you might wonder whether it leaves out some rather important pieces of the puzzle, like the responsibility to confront people about their wrong behavior or the need to set boundaries in abusive relationships. These are important nuances to this principle, but they do nothing to set it aside.

Correction, especially for repeat offenders, is important. But if you look at the biblical passages that talk about it, you'll see that it is not the principle responsibility of someone who is party to the dispute. The priority there is the restoration of the relationship. If someone has something against you, you are not in a good position to correct them.

Boundaries can be important safeguards in abusive relationships. There is a time to run or

at least hide. There are relationships that you might not be in a strong enough or a safe enough position to address. Even Jesus and Paul got out of Dodge on a few occasions. But this should always be with a prayerful view to coming back to the relationship with a *humserfessenerciful* attitude as soon as possible.

Beware, too, the misapplication of boundaries. As I illustrated from my own experience this week, when we are acting out of our own sinful subjectivity, boundaries can become little more than a manipulative bludgeon.

I don't really care if I manage to put *humserfessenergy* in your vocabulary this morning. I'll admit, it's kind of a goofy-sounding word. I'm much more concerned to put it in your repertoire of transformational tools. Hopefully, we've shown that it's right. But that doesn't mean that you yet have the confidence that it will work. And if you don't you'll probably have a tough time saying "no" to *selfrightmentulation*.

Humserfessenergy is not some psychological sleight-of-hand, though there is considerable psychological power when you respond to mistreatment in a transformational way. There are no sure-fire solutions in relationships, there are only responses that honor God and those that do not. There is *humserfessenergy* and there is *selfrightmentulation*.

When *humserfessenergy* works, it's not because it's the best way to leverage your personal power or to influence the behavior of others. When *humserfessenergy* works, it's because obeying God invites his power into situations that are beyond your control or your capacity to rehabilitate. And I've seen God transform relationships, when his people were bold enough to follow his advice—repairing relationships among families, in churches, in the workplace, and between spouses who had been on the opposite sides of the battle line for years.

I bet that some of you are staring at the wreckage of a two-fool collision in your life right now. In the light of what you've heard today, what will you do? And how will you respond to the inevitable relational crashes in your future?

Christians are not exempt from these challenges, but as followers of Jesus, we are called to live by a higher, a *humserfessenerciful* standard. And when we live by that higher standard we also invoke a higher power.

When two fools collide, who picks up the pieces? That looks like a job for our transformational God. Will you invite him into your relationships today?

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