

Hector and Maria' story introduces invalidation

Good morning friends, let's ask for God's help today...

Let's start with a scene from *A Lasting Promise*, a very helpful Christian marriage book. It's a scene between newlyweds Hector and Maria that illustrates invalidation, which is when a person "puts down the thoughts, feelings, or character of the other."

So one day Maria comes home upset from work. While tearing up, she spends a minute sharing how frustrated and upset she is by how her boss was so unfair in her poor job evaluation.

Hector responds, "I don't think your boss was all that critical. I'd be happy to have an evaluation that positive. Why don't you just give it to the Lord?" Maria sighs and starts to turn away from Hector as she says, "You don't get it. It upset me." And Hector replies, "I just think you're overreacting."

A Lasting Promise is by Christian researchers who studied decades of university research on couples and also themselves researched 135 couples for 12 straight years. In all this research, they found four destructive patterns. If one or more of these four patterns persisted with frequency, they were strong predictors of a chronically unhappy marriage or even divorce.

In this relationships sermon series we've already covered two of these patterns: the escalation ladder and the dirty glasses of negative interpretations. Today we're covering another pattern that tears down: invalidation.

The book describes invalidation as when one person "puts down the thoughts, feelings, or character of the other." So when you invalidate, you're disregarding the other person's thoughts, feelings, or character; your response suggests that they're not valid, like Hector did to Maria.

Maria shares her sadness and frustration about her boss being unfair in her poor job evaluation. Hector's response is that Maria's boss wasn't being that critical and how he'd be glad to have that positive of an evaluation and how she should just give it to God and is overreacting.

Let's not immediately make a negative interpretation of Hector here. Hector may have had good motives. He may have been trying to cheer up Maria by suggesting, "Hey, your

evaluation is not that bad.” And perhaps trying to help by suggesting Maria trust the Lord with it, even if that advice was unsolicited.

But is there anything in Hector’s response that might help Maria feel understood about her sadness and frustration over her unfair job evaluation? Probably not, because Hector’s response did not in any way acknowledge as valid Maria’s feelings or the injustice she perceived.

Relevance: Invalidation hinders life changing relationships

Hector implied that Maria’s feelings of sadness and frustration are not valid: that she’s thinking wrongly about the situation and shouldn’t be bothered it and wouldn’t be bothered by it if she was just spiritual enough to give it to God. And Hector invalidated his wife after hearing only a brief description and asking zero questions to understand further. Now Maria feels more hurt than she did before sharing with her husband.

When we experience invalidation, like Maria, it doesn’t feel good. If we keep being invalidated in a relationship, eventually we decide it’s too risky being real with that person, and we start to hide our true selves to avoid more pain. So invalidation over time can tear our connection down. As the book puts it, “What couple can maintain the ability to be ‘naked and unashamed’ when two people are putting each other down?”

As this pattern of invalidating and then hurt feelings and then hiding from each other forms, it moves us further from the life-changing relationships we long for, while tearing at our connection. Research in *A Lasting Promise* shows that if this pattern of invalidation continues in Hector and Maria’s marriage, it is one of the very best predictors of future problems and even divorce.¹

Couples aren’t the only ones vulnerable to invalidating. Say a child shares how they’re frustrated about something from their school day, and rather than making any attempt to understand, their parent goes straight to lecturing on what to do differently, tearing down.

Or say a teen wants to go to a late-night party, and their parent expresses concern for their safety, and the teen invalidates that concern by going straight to accusing their parents of never wanting them to have any fun, tearing down.

¹ From the original (in *Introduction & Chapter 2*) and revised (in *Chapter 2*) editions of *A Lasting Promise* by Stanley, et. al.

Orienting to God's Word

Thankfully, God's Word has help for when we're tempted to invalidate in any of our relationships. Help that can save us and those we love from so much pain and greatly impact the quality of our relationships over a lifetime. Help that can help our families to flourish and for kids to grow up with godly principles of relating, breaking the cycle of many of us adults, who grew up in homes where invalidation was common and even thought to be helpful.

So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the Old Testament book of Proverbs, chapter 25, Proverbs 25. If not, no worries, we'll have the verses on the screen. If you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

Proverbs talks a lot about living with wisdom rather than folly. In Proverbs chapter 25, verse 20, it paints a word picture of the foolishness of invalidating because it hurts.

Teaching: Invalidation and Scripture's better ways

Invalidation hurts – Like the hurt Hector created invalidating Maria. The book likens what Hector did to “singing songs to a heavy heart” quoting from Proverbs chapter 25, verse 20, which says this:

Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day,
or like vinegar poured on a wound,
is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.

Maria's heart was heavy over her unfair job evaluation, and she brought that heaviness to her young husband. Hector might have been trying to help, but he sang joyful songs to her heavy heart. As Maria is sad and frustrated, Hector is “singing” to her, “Cheer up, your boss wasn't that critical, I'd be glad to have that evaluation, you're just overreacting.”

When your heart is heavy, like Maria, it doesn't feel good to have those feelings invalidated, which is why verse 20 likens it to the pain of pouring vinegar over a wound, or taking away someone's garment on a cold day. Invalidation hurts.

Think back to a few weeks ago. Your power's been off for over a day. You don't know when it'll be back on, or if a pipe will burst, and you're freezing as your house is in the 40s. Now imagine someone busts in and takes away your garment, senselessly adding pain when you're already struggling.

That's what invalidation can feel like, senselessly paining a heart that's already hurting, over time tearing at the relationship. Some of us may be beginning to understand invalidation for the first time today. I was once there too. I didn't even begin to realize the many ways I invalidated others until I got married and my wife Stephanie, always kindly of course ☺, kept informing me of the ways I was invalidating.

I'm a slow learner, but eventually I picked up on the pattern of invalidation and became more aware of when I was invalidating the thoughts, feelings, or character of other people, so anyone can grow in this with God's help. As we, by God's grace, seek to invalidate less, how should we instead be relating to people, especially when they share their struggles?

Instead build others up – Let's open to the New Testament book of Ephesians, chapter 4 for a really helpful verse for this question. As you're opening, Ephesians was written by Paul, a very important early church leader, to the early church in the city of Ephesus. Ephesians chapters 1-3 show that all followers of Jesus are united as the church and enjoy incredible blessings in Jesus.

Chapter 4 starts to describe how the people of a church are to relate in light of our incredible shared blessings in Jesus. In verse 29 of chapter 4, Paul gives a powerful alternative to invalidation. Verse 29 instructs:

²⁹ Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

Verse 29 raises the bar on our speech. Nothing unwholesome, as we instead focus on what is helpful to build the other person up. To build others up, as verse 29 says, we've got to think about their needs and what kind of speech would benefit them in that moment.

Think again of Hector and Maria. Let's say they're no longer newlyweds, they've now been married five years. As we fast forward in their story, Hector has grown a lot. Now imagine again that Maria gets home, and while tearing up, spends a minute sharing for a second time how frustrated and upset she is by her boss unfairly giving her a poor evaluation.

This time, the older, wiser version of Hector focuses on building up Maria according to her needs. So Hector starts by validating rather than invalidating, saying, "That must really frustrate you." Maria, feeling safer, opens up more, saying, "Yeah, I worry about whether I'll be able to keep my job, and what we'd do without that income." Hector, still thinking first of Maria, says, "I didn't know you were so worried about losing your job, tell me more about that."

Their two job eval conversations started in the same way, but this time older, wiser Hector validated Maria's thoughts and feelings, and her character wasn't questioned, and the conversation is moving in a much better direction.

It's because Hector is thinking about what's helpful for building Maria up according to her needs, to benefit her. With Maria hurting, Hector wisely started by respecting his wife's concern and giving her a safe place to share more. Hector's focus on Maria has led to the kind of conversation that life changing relationships are built upon.

But as we build others up, does that mean we can never disagree with someone or dislike what they did? No, *A Lasting Promise* clarifies that invalidation is not the same as disagreeing with someone or disliking something they did.

There's a time and place to lovingly disagree, or share advice, or confront about a hurtful choice. As verse 29 says, our focus is to build up. Since we all have things we don't know, and are wrong about, and struggle with, building up sometimes includes loving disagreement, or advice, or confrontation. But that disagreement, advice, or confrontation should be, like verse 29 says, to build up and benefit.

Like you, I've had lots of conversations where emotions are rising, and the other person says something I disagree with or shares about a problem that's stressful for both of us. Many times, like the first example with newlywed Hector, I've gone straight to saying how that other person is wrong. Or straight to giving them my amazing unsolicited advice, before I've even taken the time to really understand the other person's situation.

Those conversations often include invalidation, and they usually don't go well for me or the other person, as I'm usually not focused on building up. I'm often responding on autopilot, just reacting without really thinking about what would build up the other person. Other times I'm not building up because I'm responding out of my own stress in the situation, and I decide to try to sooth myself in my stress by invalidating away the problem rather than building up.

Think back to newlywed Hector invalidating Maria. Perhaps part of why Hector invalidated Maria's evaluation concerns was because they stirred up fear in him. Thinking Maria's job might be in jeopardy was stressful, and so Hector invalidated Maria's concerns as a way to try to soothe himself in his stress. I sure am glad Stephanie and I have never invalidated each other's concerns because of our own stresses, say about our kids, or finances, or a church problem. 😊

Occasionally, by God's grace, I instead choose another path. As emotions start to rise, I instead think, at least to some degree, about building up the other person, and my responses look different.

When they share a painful struggle, I might build up by validating them. Something like, "It sounds like you're saying that you feel really frustrated about your boss being so unfair today." Then before giving my amazing unsolicited advice for their struggle, asking something like, "Are you wanting me to just listen or also brainstorm solutions?" to make sure I don't share unwanted advice.

Or when there's disagreement, if I'm thinking of building up, I usually don't rush into arguing about why they're wrong. Instead starting with what can be affirmed, like any places of agreement, or good motives. Then considering if it's the right time to disagree before saying it.

Please learn from my mistakes and scars. You can save yourself a lot of heartache in relationships by starting with building up the other person according to their needs, even if later in the conversation you still share your frustration, disagreement, or advice.

But it's really tough to build up the other person, especially when our feelings are stirred up. We're all in this struggle together. But the more we all focus on ourselves, the more we all end up tearing each other down and missing out on life changing relationships. So what can help us all to build up rather than invalidate?

Jesus builds into us through empathizing and helping – Let's open to the New Testament book of Hebrews chapter 4 for help with this, Hebrews 4. The book of Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who had endured hardships for their faith. Some of these persecuted Christians were tempted to lose hope and even considered leaving Jesus to return to Judaism.

So in these verses the author encourages them, and us today, to see how much Jesus empathizes and helps us in all our struggles. Let's see how Jesus wants to build into us, starting in verse 14 of Hebrews chapter 4. **(14-15)**

¹⁴Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

As we struggle in our faith in any way, including in building others up, Jesus is the right place to look for help. Verse 14 shows us how amazing Jesus is: that He's not just a priest, or even high priest, He's the great high priest. The One Who has ascended into heaven, with ongoing access to our heavenly Father, as the very Son of God.

Verse 15 goes on to say that this amazing Jesus identifies with "little 'ol us" in our human weaknesses and temptations. If you're not so sure that Jesus Himself really identifies and empathizes with you, notice how verse 15 starts.

It could have started, "we have a high priest who empathizes." But instead the verse uses a double negative to emphasize Jesus' empathy for us, saying, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses..."

He is very able to empathize with us because Jesus experienced our human struggles. He's felt what they're like, their pain and difficulty, and He feels for us as we face them. Our great high priest is always empathetic, because He loves us and really understands our pain and difficulty.

As verse 15 goes on to say, as Jesus faced our human struggles, He was tempted in every way, just as we are. Think of all the times Jesus was tempted to respond to hurt by not building up. Let's name just a few of those temptations. Like when some who Jesus grew up with turned against Him, when religious leaders repeatedly attacked Him for doing good, when one of His own disciples rebuked Him, and another betrayed Him, and then His disciples abandoned Him at His time of greatest need, as He was beaten, mocked, stripped naked, and nailed to a cross.

Jesus knows pain and temptation. He is able to empathize with yours because He is like us. Yet Jesus is also unlike us, because, as the end of verse 15 says in all this temptation, "yet he did not sin."

Jesus has not only experienced but overcome every kind of temptation. So He is able to help us when we're tempted, including when we want to tear down rather than build up with our words. Because of Jesus' empathetic love, our great high priest wants to help us.

So verse 16 invites us to come with confidence and receive the empathy and help we desperately need. Verse 16 invites:

¹⁶Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

In the Old Testament, only the high priest could approach God's throne, and only once a year, with fear. But now, because of Jesus' empathy for us and what He paid for us as our great high priest, we can confidently approach God's throne in prayer. As we do, God builds into us. He gives us mercy and grace to help us when we're invalidated and hurting and tempted to tear down rather than build up with our speech.

At God's throne, because of what Jesus has done in dying for our sins and rising from the dead, there's forgiveness for us at the throne, there's favor for us at the throne, there's empathy for us at the throne, there's empowering help for us at the throne, all to build us up, to help us in our time of need.

Next Step

This morning we've seen that invalidation hurts, it tears down, and we are instead to build others up. Whether we choose to invalidate or build others up has a lot to do with how our relationships will be in the years to come.

It's great when another person builds us up, it's such a blessing. But like newlywed Maria experienced, building up doesn't always happen. Newlywed Maria has a husband who invalidates a lot, like newlywed Stephanie did.

Even as Maria and Hector continue to mature, invalidating less and building each other up more, they'll never meet all of each other's relational needs. There'll be times when they severely wound each other.

So it's not going to go well for them, or for us, if we depend on our close relationships to always build us up. Like Maria and Hector, we need a dependable place to bring our struggles and need for validation. We need Someone Who always empathizes and is always ready to help us with our weaknesses.

So our next step this morning is to let Jesus build into us, and then build others up. That's our next step, our application.

Life changing relationships will only happen in our families, and in our church family to the extent that we all let our great high priest build us up, coming to Him for help every day.

We've heard in this series about unhealthy patterns like escalation, negative interpretations, and now invalidation. Imagine leaving this sermon series if some of us decide,

“Nah, I’m not going to Jesus daily for help with my relational junk, this stuff sounds hard to grow in...”

If I, or you, make that choice, we’re going to miss out on so much forgiveness, and favor, and empathy, and empowering help we could receive from our great high priest. He loved us enough to come and participate in our pain, though He didn’t deserve to, even choosing the cross to open His arms wide to you in love, taking the penalty for all your sin so He could bring you back into relationship with Him. And then build you up daily, always ready to give grace and mercy to help you in your time of need.

If I, or you, don’t let Jesus build you up every day, that’ll limit how much you can build others up here and at home. So this isn’t just an individual thing, our choices about whether we come to Jesus daily really impact our church and homes.

I once heard another pastor use the analogy that when we don’t let Jesus build into us, we still have the same relational needs, and as some of them aren’t met, we can become more like relational leeches with each other.

Wanting others to consistently build us up because of the internal lack we feel, while often invalidating and not building up in return. We may not mean to, but as we don’t come daily to Jesus for help, we can get in a pattern of more harming and taking from others, like a leech sucking blood.

It’s only to the extent that we’re all letting Jesus build into us, and out of that being better able to build each other up, that we’ll experience the life changing relationships this series is all about and shine brightly for Jesus. I’m going to give us all some seconds of silence to process that, and then I’ll pray we do not miss this blessing. Let’s pause now to go before God about these things...

Dismissal – Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.