

Healthy Relationships

Made for Relationship

You will not thrive as a person in this life if you do not have healthy relationships. Period. It's a strong statement, but I will stand by it all day. The inverse is also true. If you have healthy relationships, you can flourish.

Why do I say this?

Well, the story of Scripture tells us we serve a relational God and are made in relationship for relationship. We are created in the likeness of a God who is three in one. The Son is in the Father, and the Spirit is in them. God is whole. God is relationship. God is intimate. God is love.

As bearers of this relational image, we, too, are made for relationship with others who are both like us and different. We are hard-wired by God for intimacy, for connections that last, and to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. Needing others is not weakness; it's the way God made us.

There is an intentional permeability to our souls. We are designed for constant, trusting, reciprocal relationship with God and with one another.

This design goes all the way down: we were created holistically, with every mental, emotional, physical, social, spiritual, and cultural aspect of our being intended to be in right relationship with one another.

Beginning at birth with our primary caretakers, relationship is the main way we learn to understand the world, others, who we are, and even who God is. The multi-generational influence of our families of origin are the primary context where our beliefs, stories, patterns of relating, coping behaviors, and more are developed and formed, shaping our sense of who we are—culturally, socially, and personally.

Which is why God intends that these primary caretaking roles reflect the love and safety of a good, trustworthy, and gracious God.

But more often than not, this is not what we experience.

The advent of sin created a new norm. The shalom peace that comes from everything in creation being in right relationship with everything else has been shattered by division and disconnection.

We experience conflict, pain, and betrayal at the hands of those we love the most, and we hurt those we care about.

The same relationships that are meant to form and shape us in the love, safety, and trust of God—the very people meant to reflect Jesus to us and raise us to know him and deeply believe that we have value, are loved, and are worth knowing—these relationships are with flawed, fallen, and broken people like us. Even when they do the best they can, they fall short.

So we find ourselves formed and shaped by stories of sin, suffering, and sorrow. We are sinned against, which creates suffering and sorrow that we then respond to with our sin, creating more suffering and sorrow.

It becomes hard to even recognize the voice of God, because we bring the same broken or incomplete patterns, beliefs, and ways of relating that we have developed in our human relationships into our relationship with God.

Think back over your life:

- How has your ability to trust been affected by relationships?
- How have those around you impacted how you see yourself?
- How have those experiences and circumstances shaped your view of God?

On one end of a spectrum, some of us learn to be overly *independent*, finding it difficult to trust others and fearing intimacy or having needs. On the other end are those of us who are overly *dependent*, who don't know who we are outside of a relationship. Most of us fall somewhere on this spectrum—where, exactly, is informed by our experiences.

We are disciples of our own dysfunction. We reflect our first parents, Adam and Eve, more than our heavenly Father, and we don't know another way.

Enter Jesus.

Sin severed humanity's relationship with God, so God gave up all his divine rights and became human. Being both God and man, Jesus healed that severed relationship in a way that can no longer be severed.

Then he gives us his own identity so that relational healing can be ours, too. Far beyond simply modifying our behavior, Jesus makes us new.

Now, the pursuit of healthy relationships is no longer each of us trying to clean up our acts in self-oriented isolation, willing ourselves to do differently, to believe differently, to be different. Our pursuit of healthy relationships is now about living into our new identity in Christ and becoming who we already are.

God uses the very way we have been formed—through relationships over time—to *re-form* us. Called, not to be independent or dependent, but *interdependent*, we come to experience the love, safety, and trust of God most powerfully through his Spirit displayed in his people.

So together we practice confronting pain with one another, maintaining integrity, offering deep forgiveness, learning to engage anger in a godly way, confessing our needs, and celebrating.

As we relearn through these practices what it means to have relationships that seek to honor God in honesty and sacrificial love, we slowly become less of a stranger to ourselves, integrating our conscious theology with our unconscious theology, integrating our God concept with our God image.

All our relationships become defined by our Christ-identity rather than our past. Living into this new identity will be a life-long process, but God never leaves us alone in it. We are no longer isolated. We are loved at every step and love, not willpower, is the primary thing that changes our hearts.

Reflect

What relationships have helped you to trust? What relationships have hindered your ability to trust?

Love One Another

See, Christ's loving restoration of us to God also restored our capacity to relate to one another. In becoming children of God, we become brothers and sisters of one another.

And the core of how we relate to one another in the family of God is this command from *John 13:34-35*:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

For the apostle John, this "new commandment" is key to Christian living. He recorded it again in John 15 and repeated it in each of his three letters.

What does it mean, then, to love as Jesus has loved us?

Self-sacrificial love

The word "love" has different meanings in different contexts. When you say "I love pizza," it obviously doesn't mean the same thing as when you say to a dear friend, "I love spending time with you."

In *John 15:13*, Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends," giving us a much deeper understanding of the word "love." In his death and resurrection, we see love on display in its truest, most glorious state. Love urges us to see one another's good as undeniably tied to our own wellbeing and compels us to give all we can to ensure others' wellbeing.

Warm and affectionate love

Each of the apostles caught the vision of Jesus' love and repeated these commands in various ways. In his letter to the Roman Christians, Paul commanded them to love one another with the affection of siblings. In his second letter, Peter tied mutual affection and love together as two of the qualities that make us effective and productive in our knowledge of Christ.

The common wisdom in our world is that you can love someone without liking them. But this command presses against that. It calls us to see that affection is appropriate and even necessary among Christians. There are certainly people who are difficult

for each of us to like—you're thinking of a few right now. However, our God delights in *all* of his people and we now follow Jesus by cultivating familial affection for one another and seeking godly love when we find our affections lacking.

Others-preferring love

Writing to the church in Philippi, Paul put it this way:

...complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing for rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourself.

Love, according to Scripture, is not self-centered. It doesn't seek relationships or situations that are beneficial to itself. Love doesn't express itself in demanding others conform to us and our expectations. Love is expressed in seeking common ground, rather than in our own personal happiness. We show real love when we set aside selfish ambition and self-importance, and seek after what is best for others.

Of course, while everyone in the church is a brother or sister in Christ, we will still have different levels of trust and safety with individual people. Jesus had many friends and followers, but there were twelve he was closer to than any others and, even among those twelve, there were three—Peter, James, and John—he was even closer to. We will be closer with some people than with others, and that's all right. That's just how it works when your family is global and stretches across millennia!

In such a massive family, boundaries are necessary. Discernment is necessary. We're finite beings and only have so much relational capacity. But we are called to pursue these things while still always wanting the best for the other, even if we aren't in close relationship with them.

On the other side of the coin, we need a robust understanding of friendship to truly experience healthy community. We need to be intentional about seeking out and investing in deep, meaningful friendships, which will take time, patience, intentionality, risk, and a whole lot of grace. You can't make old friends quickly.

If this kind of self-sacrificial, affectionate, others-preferring love feels impossible... you're right. At least on our own. That's why Jesus did not stop with living a loving life and dying a loving death, but promises to continue to conform us to his likeness.

Love on Display

Now let's talk about one of the major (and most practical) ways we display Christ-like love.

We just heard Jesus' simple statement that love is displayed in a willingness to give your life for your friends. Which he then did himself, giving his life "as a ransom for many," "for the sins of the world." This greatest act of love, God giving his life for his friends, can be summed up in one word: **forgiveness**.

Forgiveness is integral to the very character of God. When he revealed himself to Moses on Mount Sinai, he proclaimed:

I AM, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin....

While it may seem like only a small portion of Jesus' teachings are dedicated to forgiveness, it is worth noting that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all attach Jesus' teachings on prayer—which is the expression of a Christian's intimacy with God—to forgiveness.

Furthermore, Jesus *lived* forgiveness. He forgave his friends for misunderstanding his teachings, for sleeping in his moment of need, for abandoning him, and even for openly denying him.

Paul exhorts us to forgive one another "as God in Christ forgave you" and therefore "be imitators of God."

Forgiveness is an integral posture of our hearts as we draw near to Jesus and imitate him in order to become like him. It is the ultimate expression of self-sacrificial, affectionate, others-centered love.

But what *is* forgiveness?

Common approaches to forgiveness are glib. When offended, we say to ourselves, "Don't worry about it," or "It's fine." In doing so, we pass over forgiveness and try to ignore offense. However, wounds will not heal if they are ignored. Denying there was an offense is no the same as overlooking a genuine offense.

To forgive is to give up all rights to vengeance, retribution, or retaliation. We have to be honest about what the offense was, how it affected us, and then surrender any right we have to hurt others in return.

Being in close relationship with broken people requires us to have a robust and lived-in forgiveness practice—not just something we subscribe to but something we practice on the regular. We are called to be a people that reflect our Lord.

While forgiveness is both an event and a process it is, first of all, a choice. We don't wait for the emotions, then forgive. And forgiving does not mean we enter back into relationship or that we trust that person again.

But we remember that forgiveness is healing, it is healthy, and it is a specific command to us as Christians. Most importantly, we remember Jesus is the King of Forgiveness. All our sins are against him, yet he gave up all his divine rights and humbled himself to death.

Now, the main context in which forgiveness and love will express themselves is friendship. Some of us will have spouses, some may have children, but all of us are created to have friendships.

Reflect

Where did you learn how to forgive? How have you seen it done well? How do you practice forgiveness in your relationships?

True Friendship

In a culture that idolizes independence, what we call friendship is often really just networking where we use others for our good rather than serving them for their good.

But true friendship is not based on what someone can do for us or having the same career or same hobbies or same background. It's fine to have acquaintances in all of those areas, but Christian friendship is something different and deeper. True friendship is based on Christ and his mission.

In the twelfth century, a monk named Aelred of Rievaulx proposed there were three types of friendship, each based on different shared goals:

- **Carnal friendship** is based on affinity or amusement—you like the same things.
- **Worldly friendship** is based on usefulness—you're in the friendship for what you get out of it.
- And **spiritual friendship** is based on a mutual commitment to following Jesus.

Spiritual friends have a shared vision of a good and fulfilling life and help each other in their pursuit of that vision. We need friendships that are centered on Christ and share this common goal of life together, under the rule of Christ, pursuing him together.

You need friends who pray for you, speak truth into your life, and point you to Jesus. You need friends who can both encourage you and correct you. You need friendships that are centered on Christ.

Or, as Aelred put it:

Friendship must begin in Christ, continue with Christ, and be perfected by Christ.

It doesn't start with us or our friends, it starts by looking to Jesus, who is a better friend than we could possibly imagine. Do you ever think about Jesus as a friend?

In the accounts of his life, we see Jesus was so close to John that at the Last Supper John laid his head on Jesus' chest. Jesus washed Judas' feet even when he knew he would betray him. Jesus sought Peter out after he denied him in order to restore their relationship.

Jesus is the greatest friend imaginable. He's safe, he listens, he calls us out when we need it, he cares enough to be with us through thick or thin, and he forgives us when we aren't great friends in return. What a gift!

But you might think: *Wait, isn't he King? Isn't he Savior? How can he be a friend?* I didn't say it's a friendship of equals. Jesus is our great king who, by his grace, also calls us "friend."

And we see the fullness of Christ's commitment to us as our friend at the cross. When Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends," he gave us two incredible truths.

One—Jesus calls you "friend." He doesn't just love you, he *likes* you and he loves loving you.

Two—He laid down his life for you to restore the friendship with him you are made for but that has been damaged by sin.

Growing in friendship with one another starts with us looking to Christ together and loving one another in the same way he's loved us.

To boil it down, healthy relationships and deep friendships don't just happen. They require sacrifice, work, and grace—both grace extended to others and grace extended to *us* by them. The kind of grace that is only made possible in us by God's grace over us in Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

For years, our church has met right down the street from the Museum of Broken Relationships. But God calls his church to the opposite: to serve as a monument of reconciled relationships, where the healing power of God's love restores people, relationships, and whole communities. To be full of displays of God's reconciling grace.

Like all of Christ's church, we aren't a community of perfect people. We are a community of redeemed people.

We are a new family.

Reflect

Consider who in your life has been an example of spiritual friendship. How has this relationship helped you grow in God's love? How do you want to grow as a friend?