



Stewards of relationships

Getting to the heart of it all

1 John 3:16-20

"A lot of people have gone further than they thought they could because someone else thought they could." – Unknown author

"You can never establish a personal relationship without opening up your own heart." – Paul Tournier

No one lying on their deathbed has ever said, "I wish I would have spent more time at work."

No one lying on their deathbed has ever said, "I wish I would have spent more time at work." End-of-life regrets so often surround what hindsight teaches us concerning relationships. At the end of the day and at the end of this life, relationships are really what it is all about.

Relationships, like people themselves, come in many forms. They can get complicated and messy. Some people are in relationships they wish they could get out of while others find themselves on the outside of relationships they wish they could get into. At the end of the day – and at the end of our life – what we really need most is to belong and to be loved.

We were all born into a family. Maybe it was only a family of two, or maybe it was a family of 12. For most of us, this included immediate and extended family members. Many, but not all, people marry sometime in life – though statistics show a gradual decline in the number of people who marry. Some, but not all, couples have children. Many, but not all, have the opportunity to have significant people in their lives who serve as mentors. Most, but not all, have significant people they call close friends. And all of us have at least the opportunity to develop a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Even though it may be easier to focus on what we do not have in relationships, I would challenge us to take time to consider what we do have. In 1 John 3:16 we read, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us." To say we are loved is not about whether we have 10 best friends or that we are married to the most wonderful person in the world, or that we have the most thoughtful children.



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The greatest relationship gift is one we can all have – a relationship with God through Christ who offers the purest and deepest qualities of selfless love any of us can experience. All other relationships fall short and will disappoint, even as we ourselves fall short and disappoint those we care about.

In this lesson, we want to take time to review various forms of relationships, such as mentors, friends and family. Rather than focus on what we have not experienced, let's be grateful for the circle of relationships we do enjoy.

Mentor relationships

There are two types of mentoring: natural and intentional. Natural mentoring comes in the form of supervisors, managers, coaches, teachers, favorite aunts or uncles, etc. We may not introduce these people with the mentor title, but that in essence is how they function in our lives. We watch them and value what we hear them say and see them do.

On the other hand, intentional mentoring results from structured programs where mentors and mentees are intentionally paired. Many congregations have integrated mentoring into their youth ministry programs. Others appoint mentors during a time of preparation for baptism. Think back over your life and consider those who have functioned in either of these mentoring roles in your life.

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- Who have been important mentors in your life?
- Were these people natural or intentional mentors? How were you paired together in these relationships?
- Do you serve as a mentor to someone else? What have the rewards of this relationship been for you?

Mutuality and mentoring

What famous pairings come to mind as you think of people who have worked together or served together? In these relationships, the gifts of the one complement the other. Neither would have been as effective alone as they were working in tandem. These relationships were mutually beneficial. Here are a few familiar pairs. Can you think of others from history, modern culture or Scripture?

Historic pairs

1. Abbott and Costello
2. Ben and Jerry
3. Lewis and Clark
4. Bonnie and Clyde
5. Others?

Biblical pairs

1. Elisha and Elijah
2. Ruth and Naomi
3. Moses and Aaron
4. Eli and Samuel; Samuel and Saul; Saul and David; David and Jonathan
5. Jesus and Peter; James and John
6. Paul and Timothy
7. Priscilla and Aquila
8. Others

Friendships: To belong and be loved (John 15:13-17)

Jesus had friends. Is it fair to say he needed friends? It's rather impressive to consider that Jesus as Son of God and Lord of Lords wasn't much for lofty titles when it got right down to it. He preferred to think of his followers as friends (John 15:13-15). We also know Jesus had a close relationship with Lazarus. In John 11:3, Mary, the sister of Lazarus, sends word to Jesus about Lazarus: "The one you love is sick." Later, in John 11:35, we read that "Jesus wept" after hearing of the death of Lazarus, his dear friend and brother of his friends Mary and Martha.

Jesus did not insulate himself from the pain associated with friendship. We are also made aware of how much Jesus needed these close relationships for wholeness and his well-being. Jesus was a social as well as spiritual being – just like us. We know that Jesus would get away to spend time by himself and with God (John 6:15; Matthew 14:23), but Jesus also took time to get away from the crowds and his work to be renewed by hanging out with his friends. (Luke 10:38-42)

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- Describe a relationship from your past or present that you might compare to what Jesus and Lazarus might have shared.
- In what ways do you think Jesus was strengthened in his ministry, because of his relationship with Lazarus, Mary and Martha?
- As you review your life, what friendships have there been that helped get you through difficult times?
- What happens when we see Jesus only as a transcendent spiritual being and diminish his human social and relational needs?
- Name a time when you felt a gap in your life due to limited friendships.
- How important is it to belong and be loved? How do friendships contribute to meeting these basic human needs? Can we depend on others too much to fill these emotional needs?

Family relationships

Marriage

Six biblical methods for acquiring a spouse:

1. Have God create a wife for you while you sleep. It will cost you a rib. (Genesis 2:19-24)
2. Purchase a piece of property and get a wife as part of the deal. (Ruth 4:5-10)
3. Go to a party and hide. When the women come out to dance, grab one and carry her off to be your wife. (Judges 21:19-25)
4. Even if no one is out there, just wander around a bit and you'll definitely find someone. It's all relative, of course. (Genesis 4:16-17)
5. Become an emperor of a huge nation and hold a beauty contest. (Esther 2:3-4)
6. A wife ... I don't think so! (1 Corinthians 7:32-35)

There are other stories from Scripture with even less appealing methods described. Marriage relationships are a blessing, but are often challenging at the same time. One of the challenges of being married is to diligently avoid becoming isolated as a couple from other people. In the church and in society, there is a tendency to rely so much on our partner that you fail to maintain your other relationships. This is especially true when it comes to maintaining healthy contact with people who are not married.

Those who are married need to develop an enhanced awareness of singles, divorced people, widows and widowers. The number of unmarried people in our society continues to increase.

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- How do those who are married work at maintaining connections with other important relationships in their lives?
- How can those who are married channel appropriate attention to others who also need care and nurturing?
- Do single people in your church feel welcomed?
- Does your congregation have specialized ministries for singles as well as for those who want to grow in their marriages? Why can this be challenging? Are there ways to partner with other congregations to address these issues?

Parents and siblings

We have all had parents at one time – many have siblings. Family has been described as the place where we can go where they have to take us in. That may be overly simplistic, but in most cases is true. I remember when I was growing up wishing at times I belonged to a different family. I'm sure no one else ever felt that way! Other families seemed to take better vacations and appeared to have it all together. Having been a pastor, I have learned that all families have their struggles and none are perfect. We are all dysfunctional to one degree or another.

Even Jesus had family “issues.” (Luke 2:41-52; Matthew 12:46-50) His brothers were not among the first to believe and follow. (John 7:1-5) I'm glad the gospel writers included these bits of family trivia about Jesus. One of the hardest settings in which to be a Christian is among those who know us best. Do you suppose Jesus was ever tempted to wish he were in a different family?

To whom much is given ...

Jesus modeled how to draw strength from his relationships – including his relationships with God, his disciples and his special friends. These relationships, in turn, empowered him to face his life's challenges. Below is a Relationship Ledger that may help you consider the wealth of relationships you have. Our tendency may be to stick to ourselves and enjoy what it means to belong and be loved. But to be a good steward of relationships, we also need to find ways to give back.

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Use the following exercise to take inventory of all that God has given you in the gift of relationships and what you in turn have given back. List the names of mentors, friends and family that have enriched your life.

List the names of mentors, friends and family who have enriched your life in the first column. In the second column, name those you are intentionally called to nurture and serve.

Relationship ledger

**Mentors, friends and family
(Gifts received)**

**Those I am nurturing
(Gifts extended)**

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- How well balanced is your Relationship Ledger?
- How did you develop these relationships?
- Are you open to serving as an intentional mentor and friend as an expression of relational stewardship?
- What opportunities exist in your congregation and community to give of yourself as a mentor and friend?

Additional reading and small group discussion resources

Ganger, Steve. *Priority Parenting: Reclaiming Your Home for Heaven's Sake*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005.

Kauffman, Gerald and Marlene. *Monday Marriage: Celebrating the Ordinary*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005.



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Student handout

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Getting started

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Mentor relationships

There are two types of mentoring: natural and intentional. Natural mentoring can come from everyday situations wherein anyone can be your mentor. You can learn through friendships that develop with neighbors, schoolmates or coworkers. On the other hand, intentional mentoring comes from a structured program where the mentor and the mentee are chosen from a list and matched through a formal procedure.

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- Who have been important mentors in your life?

- Were these persons natural or intentional mentors? How did you get paired together in these relationships?

- Do you serve as a mentor to another person? What have the rewards of this relationship been for you?



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Discussion questions for reflection and learning

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- In what ways do you think Jesus was strengthened in his ministry because of his relationship with Lazarus, Mary and Martha?
- As you review your life, what friendships have there been that helped get you through difficult times?
- What happens when we see Jesus only as a transcendent spiritual being and diminish his very human social and relational needs?

- Name a time when you felt a gap in your life due to limited friendships.
- How important is it to belong and be loved? How do friendships contribute to meeting these basic human needs? Can we depend on others too much to fill these emotional needs?
- Share a story about when the concept of “community” was important in your life.

Family relationships

Married people need an enhanced awareness of singles, divorced people, widows and widowers. The number of unmarried people in our society continues to increase.

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

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