

6 - Healthy Relationships

God is a god of relationships. From beginning to end, the Bible speaks of relationships; the good, the bad, and everything in between. And, throughout human history, we see God's purposes for humanity being worked out through relationships. Therefore, it's understandable that the Bible instructs us to *be imitators of God, as beloved children* (Ephesians 5:1). As God's children, we can live His grace through our relationships as we assimilate God's character.

The phrase "one another" appears approximately 90 times in the New Testament, showing us that God considers Christian relationships to be a high priority. Relationships, especially with fellow believers, are the most revealing disclosure of our relationship with God. The apostle Paul explains in Colossians 3:12-13a, that collectively and individually, we are to *put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,* ¹³ *bearing with one another.* Again, we see that our vertical relationship with God guides the nature of our horizontal relationships and serves as a template for Christian character and relationship development.

As believers in Jesus, we can positively impact the relationships that exist around us. As we are transformed in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour, this makes an important statement for Jesus Christ to others. We could be the person who introduces someone to Jesus, and ultimately directs them on a path to salvation and a relationship with God.

So, how do we go about living an impactful life that pleases God and influences others towards Jesus?

- The answer comes as we grow to know God through His Word; then, we live His character through our lives by the strength of His Holy Spirit.
- This requires Bible study, a soft-hearted attitude towards learning, and a self-sacrificing love for God that chooses to love others with the love of Jesus.

Let's consider just a few essentials for healthy relationships.

1) Seek to know God better in your friendships

Psalm 73:28 *But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.*

- ~ When we experience a close walk with the Lord, and we feel the safety of the relationship with Him, we are part of something unmistakable. It's only natural that we would want to talk to others about this major shift in life. Obviously, the people who will understand your closeness with God best will be other believers. However, we should maintain friendships with our non-Christian friends and family as you will be the vehicle God uses to communicate His love and truth to them.

Psalm 22:26 *...those who seek him shall praise the LORD...*

- ~ It's a fact, those who genuinely seek to know the Lord will be those who praise Him. Their love for Him will flow through appreciation which will look for ways to be expressed.
- ~ Psalm 9:10, *those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.* The security found in the Lord invariably causes a believer to seek a more intimate knowledge of the Almighty. Seeking greater intimacy with the Lord is normal as you walk and talk with Him in your new life of growing trust.

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- ~ 1 John 2:3, *by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.* Those who seek the Lord will find Him and knowingly walk with Him. These people's lives are increasingly characterised by a growing obedience to Him.
- ~ 1 Peter 3:15a, *in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy...* It is appropriate for believers to elevate the knowledge of Christ, and their relationship with Him to the highest place of respect.

Therefore, as Christians, it's important to develop relationships with people who will walk through life with us as we seek to know God better. These people should increasingly form our primary friendships while recognising that other friendships are also great to have. Remember, it may be that you will be the influence which inspires others to know God better.

2) Nurture a servant attitude in friendships

A servant attitude rises directly from knowing Jesus, who said about Himself, *the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Matthew 20:28). Jesus willingly gave His life to serve sinners on the cross as His ultimate act of service. As we walk with the Lord, getting to know Him better, obeying Him more, the Holy Spirit will seek to mature within us a humble Christlike quality of service to others.

Through the many relationships of life, we should watch for two qualities in friendships.

First, do others make it easy for me to serve them? Or do they make serving undesirable and almost impossible?

Second, do my friends enjoy serving others? Or do they want the upper hand in friendships where they get more than they give.

The answers to these two questions will help direct us towards good friendships. A servant friendship will be a mutual friendship with give and take. It will have flexibility that looks out for the other and should be the normal flow of the friendship. Just as we are to serve others, so we are to allow others to serve us.

Jesus' younger brother James had a very practical belief in God which effected the everyday events of his life. Amongst other things, James said we are to be *...pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere* (James 3:17). What a wonderful set of qualities to bring into any relationship. I suspect none of us would complain if we were surrounded by friends like this.

Once again, as Christians, we seek to duplicate Jesus' qualities into our lives. So also, the Holy Spirit seeks to express Jesus' qualities through us. Galatians 5:22-23 explains that *the fruit* (the expression) *of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*. Attitudes and acts of service best give expression to the Holy Spirit's activity and Christ's character. Therefore, we should *do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others* (Philippians 2:3-4). This is the servant heart we see in Jesus, and we pray will be seen in us.

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With service in mind, we nurture friendships which have a servant nature. This can take time, and patience will be required. Again, it may be that your servant attitude will influence others to follow Christ more closely.

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3) Recognise God's activity in friendships

When we pray, it is not simply to get what we want. No, prayer's priority is worship. In its simplest form, worship speaks of God with thankfulness which flows from appreciation and gratitude. Jesus' prayer template, explained in Mathew 5:9-15, begins with worship...

⁹ *Our Father in heaven, hallowed (holy) be your name.*

¹⁰ *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven* (Matthew 6:9-10).

- ~ Recognising God in any way should stimulate a worship response.
- ~ The forward movement of worship desires to see and experience God's will being achieved here on earth just as it is perfectly achieved in heaven.
- ~ When this is true in a Christian's life, the instruction by Paul happens naturally. *Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving* (Colossians 4:2). Seeking to know the Lord causes a cycle of events. We pray, we worship, we ask, we watch for God's activity, we respond with thanks or more questions, we worship more, we ask more, and we watch for Him more. This is a healthy cycle of watchful prayer for believers in Jesus Christ.

This pattern also applies to our relationships. We talk with God about our relationships as they initiate, as they grow and change, and as they either strengthen or struggle. We look for God's involvement in our relationships, seeking to distinguish between the friendships which inspire healthy Christlike character and those that don't. Christians want to participate with God's activity in our relationships, so we follow His lead, beginning with good prayer communication.

4) Manage friendships wisely

For the most part, humans are social creatures who live through relationships. Generally, we desire good quality relationships which bring benefit and don't cause pain. No matter what the situation, good quality friendships are pleasing to God and a blessing to us and others.

However, as we know, there are people who use friendships to extract from you whatever they can get. Therefore, we need to be wise in our choice of friendships. Paul cautioned the Corinthian church of this, as they struggle greatly with the whole concept of healthy and unhealthy relationships.

1 Corinthians 15:33 (ESV) *Do not be deceived: Bad company ruins good morals.*

1 Corinthians 15:33 (NIV) *Do not be misled: Bad company corrupts good character.*

Just as we are to be intentional in our friendships, so we are to evaluate the quality of friendships. Evaluation enables us to make changes within a friendship, and, if needed, to separate from an unhealthy friendship that won't permit change.

James 4:4 points out *that friendship with the world is enmity with God?* Now, James is NOT saying that we can't have friends who are not Christian. No, James is simply highlighting the fact that when a person's primary love, or friendships, are of the world and governed by

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worldly values and behaviour, these friendships are in opposition to God. Believers in Jesus as Lord desire to develop friendships with godly characteristics and values, not worldly ones. This may require some thought as we navigate a changing lifestyle from worldly living to God honouring living.

Relationship transformation was included in Paul's thinking when he wrote, *do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...* (Romans 12:2). Again, Paul is NOT saying that we should isolate ourselves from the world. No, but as Christians, we are not to be molded or directed by worldly values. Instead, as our thinking is progressively transformed by the Word of God we allow the new biblical values to become our values.

When Job lost everything in life, which you can read about in Job 1:6-2:10, he unexpectedly discovered the falseness of the relationships which surrounded him. *My relatives have failed me, my close friends have forgotten me... All my intimate friends abhor me, and those whom I loved have turned against me* (Job 19:14, 19). What a tragic discovery. When financial disaster hit Job, plus the grief of losing all his children through death, then becoming desperately sick himself, Job's friends and family abandoned him. Obviously, we wouldn't wish that on anyone, so we look to be deliberate in how we manage our friendships with God's love and the wisdom of His Word.

We do this, not only to spare ourselves the extreme pain of Job, but to spare those close to us such pain also. As we commit to being a true friend that lives the love of God, we prove that we don't abandon others when we or they are in great need or suffering.

5) Honour God's design for marriage

God's distinction of marriage is that He created the template of one man united with one woman for life when He created Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:18-24). God's design of marriage is a life-long, exclusive, heterosexual union of two people, which is consistent throughout Scripture wherever marriage is spoken of.

God has provided resources for Spirit filled believers to overcome the natural struggles in marriage. Through obedience to God's Word spouses can experience fulfilment, satisfaction, and longevity of a peaceful relationship (Matthew 19:1-9; 1 Peter 3:7; 2 Corinthians 6:14; Ephesians 5:18-33).

Through God's resources, couples can avoid the pains of a failed marriage relationship (Malachi 2:10-16). Instead, both spouses can increasingly mirror the loving relationship of Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5:18-33). This is where husbands love and lead as Christ does the Church, and wives respond as the church responds to Christ (Ephesians 5:21-28).

Conclusion

Having Jesus Christ as Lord impacts every relationship in life. Marriage, family, business, employment, educational, neighbourly, social, sports, hobbies, no relationship goes untouched by Christ. We don't want to be the type of Christian friend who rams an unwanted gospel into our friends, but we do want our *speech* [to] *always be gracious* (Colossians 4:6) and encouraging of our friends. Therefore, *be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ*

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God forgave you (Ephesians 4:32). Forgiveness is the most powerful expression of God's love, it prevents offence being taken, and it builds robust long-term friendships.

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God wants you to be a great friend to have, and, *if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone* (Romans 12:18). A necessary quality in our contribution to all relationships should be that we *do all things without grumbling or disputing*,¹⁵ *that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world* (Philippians 2:14-15). Our character, and especially the way we treat others, makes a powerful statement to the world about our relationship with the Lord Jesus.

Through Christlike character in our relationships, we will be given opportunities to encourage and comfort fellow believers. Similarly, our non-Christian friends will give us opportunities to tell them about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our relationships have enormous potential for glorying the Lord and blessing one another, and it only takes a little love and effort.

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