

CHAPTER SIX

RICH IN RELATIONSHIPS (I)

INVESTING IN FRIENDSHIP

→ **Strategy:** The rich single life exhibits a love for others that produces meaningful friendships radiating the deep glow of fellowship.

“It’s a Wonderful Life” is my favorite movie of all time. For those of you who have never seen it (both of you), Jimmy Stewart plays George Bailey, an ordinary guy from Bedford Falls. Time after time, year after year, George gives up his dreams for the sake of his responsibilities. One Christmas Eve, life comes crashing in around him. When all he has built seems futile, George resolves to end his life by leaping from a bridge. At the last moment, Clarence Odbody, his guardian angel, steps in and shows him what life would be like in Bedford Falls if George had never been born. Through Clarence’s intervention, George sees that because of his impact on others he truly is “the richest man in town.” In the closing scene a grateful George picks up a book left for him by Clarence and reads the parting inscription, “Remember, no man is a failure who has friends.”

“ If a man does not make new acquaintances as he advances through life, he will soon find himself left alone. A man, Sir, should keep his friendship in constant repair.¹ ”

— Samuel Johnson

That line is always a guaranteed tear-jerker in my family—I suppose because it rings so true. George Bailey discovers that sharing our lives with one another yields a value and richness far beyond even our greatest accomplishments. People

everywhere want to make a difference in the lives of others and to experience the benefits of meaningful human relationships. We all want friendship.

Meditate on Ruth 1:1-18. How would Ruth’s expression of commitment have affected Naomi following the loss of her husband and sons?

How deep does this desire run? In a recent poll of religious belief among people age 18 to 28, most said they felt it was more important to be accepted by others than to believe in God! The greatest needs that faith should meet, according to this group, include “not being judged,” “avoiding ridicule,” “finding an unshockable ear who will always love me no matter what,” and having “someone

For Further Study:
Read John 3:16 and 1 John 3:16. What one idea connects these two verses with similar addresses?

is that, apart from God's grace, no one can receive or give real love. I don't recommend sending that little nugget around the interoffice e-mail, but it is true nonetheless. As natural-born sinners wrapped up in self, we have nothing in us to generate a love that is not sin-infested and self-promoting. Scripture clearly shows that our ability to love comes from God. "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins....We love because he first loved us" (1Jn 4:10,19). We all want to love and be loved, but our ability truly to do so begins with God's initiative and example of what love should look like.

Friendship is one specific expression of love from God; God often relates to his chosen ones as a friend (Ex 33:11, Jas 2:23). So, to enjoy true friendship, we must first understand true love. Paul's familiar exposition on love in

“ Through him alone do we have access to one another, joy in one another, and fellowship with one another.⁵ ”

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer

1 Corinthians 13 provides ideal guidance on how to practice friendship God's way. For a fresh look at this passage, let's read a portion of it from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the New Testament:

No matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love. Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, isn't always "me first," doesn't fly off the handle, doesn't keep the score of the sins of others, doesn't revel when others grovel, takes pleasure in the flowering of the truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end. Love never dies.⁶

For Further Study:
Read 1 John 4:8-21. Why must those who love God also love their brother?

What are some practical implications of letting God's love define our friendships? Can we choose to befriend only people who seem to be compatible with us? Can we let prejudice tell us to avoid those who are not like us? Can we pursue friendships to improve our social standing? Can we test a friend's loyalty and then break off the friendship if he or she flunks the test? Can we just "not like" certain people? Clearly, the love of God in our hearts will war against any of these sinful motivations. Instead, in response to the love he has given us, Jesus calls us to a humble, sacrificial, and faith-filled adventure in love. As

Meditate on James 2:23. Is there any reason you can't consider yourself a friend of God?

“ Friendship between earthly friends consists much in affection; but yet, those strong exercises of affection, that actually carry them through fire and water for each other, are the highest evidences of true friendship.⁷ ”

— Jonathan Edwards

Meditate on Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. Are there any areas in your life where independence may be depriving you of important help through friendship?

relationship,” I think you would see a whole host of implied commitments and expectations that define the relationship—a friendship “covenant” gone berserk.

So the issue is not *whether* we form relational mini-covenants, but whether we form them according to God's ways. Basically, God has a simple, all-purpose, three-word formula for Christian friendships: love one another. That's it. Jesus said it (Jn 15:17), Paul said it (Ro 13:8), Peter said

it (1Pe 1:22), and John said it (1Jn 4:11). Of course, there is some fine print to this formula. I have given you a little of it in the selection from 1 Corinthians 13 above. (See 1 John 4:7-21 for the total package.) While loving one another God's way can seem overwhelming, let us remember that in

both his empowering and his example, it is God who gives us the ability to love.

Covenant love binds us into relationships. If we develop our friendships and maintain them with covenant love, disagreements will never destroy them. We won't demand something from a friend that we can get only from God. If marriage enters the picture and we're the odd man out, we won't resent it; we will rejoice. If a friend stumbles in temptation, we will be faithful to continue to love him unconditionally, even while holding the standard of righteousness in plain sight. If a friend suffers loss, we will suffer with him: “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Pr 17:17). We will realize that in the family of God all relationships are eternal. Regardless of changes in status, location, or accessibility, we will faithfully honor a relationship in whatever way appropriate across the years.

I recently took my kids to the Mall area of Washington, D.C. As we walked toward the stark, sober granite of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, I told them that relatives and friends of the deceased soldiers whose names cover “The Wall” often visit there. As we walked the path that runs alongside the memorial, we noticed a man sitting cross-legged next to it. He was weeping, deeply and unashamedly. We quietly passed by, and in a few minutes looked back. He was gone. Left in his place leaning against the wall was a small pad of paper. On the pad was scribbled the following message.

3 In a typical one-on-one interaction, what percent of your behavior involves talking about and focusing on yourself, and what percent involves listening to and focusing on the other person? As a goal, what would you like the two percentages to be?

	Typical	Goal
Focus on me	_____	_____
Focus on another	_____	_____
Total	100%	100%

ties may (and should) also help us grow as individual believers. We can't "do" fellowship, but we can experience it. Fellowship may result from something as pleasant as sharing a testimony or praying together, or from something as unpleasant as confessing our sin. Whatever the event, when God uses a friendship to increase my spiritual maturity, I have had fellowship.

Because God is involved, fellowship can occur in unlikely ways. It doesn't even require relational closeness or a shared history—I can have deep fel-

lowship with a Christian whom I have just met. Nevertheless, friendships remain vital to our relational diet because they give us the *best* and *most frequent* opportunities to experience fellowship. A lack of friendships will inevitably result in a lack of fellowship.

“ Fellowship with God, then, is the source from which fellowship among Christians springs; and fellowship with God is the end to which Christian fellowship is a means.¹⁰

— J.I. Packer

A second truth about fellowship is this: *Fellowship can only occur among Christians.* This is the major reason we ought never to let our closest relationships be with those who do not walk with Christ. Paul warns us of as much. “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.

For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?.... What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?” (2Co 6:14-16). You may love to hang out with the guys at the office, or with your sorority sisters from old Party U., but if these represent your primary friendship network, you'll get some good times, but you won't get fellowship.

Please take a moment to think about your relationships. Do you get most of your relational enjoyment from hanging out with people who don't know Christ? Do you believe that career success requires you to focus primarily on business relationships? Perhaps you've tried to connect with some Christians you know, but they seem to be less like you than your non-Christian friends, so you're tempted to go with what is more comfortable. The good pastor Charles Spurgeon encourages you, “In your choice of friends, choose those who are the friends of God.”¹¹ Spurgeon's contemporary, J.C. Ryle, puts it a little more

Meditate on 1 John

1:1-4. How would John's personal experience of Jesus Christ have allowed him to experience deeper fellowship with others?

4 What is one statement your speech repeatedly makes about you that you regret? Here are a few sample entries to get you thinking:

- My motto is: Why should I ask a question when I can render an opinion?
- I am "The_Human_Internet@megabrain.com"
- If you can interrupt me when I stop to breathe, you can sometimes shut me up.
- Small talk is the best talk.

Write your entry in the space below:

Meditate on Proverbs

17:9. How can you promote love when someone brings you gossip about someone else?

Set an example in speech. Our speech has an amazing ability to reveal our hearts; it is the loud-speaker of our lives. It broadcasts who we are—for better or worse—far beyond our ability to control it. Our speech can alienate people or get us in a heap of trouble without our even knowing it. James warns us that the same tongue that blesses can curse as well (Jas 3:9-10). But our speech can also encourage, edify, and inform. Believers are encouraged to "let your conversation be always full of grace" (Col 4:6), and we're reminded that "the lips of the righteous nourish many" (Pr 10:21).

What does your speech say about you? Are there any ways you speak that hinder your relationships?

- Do you express your pride by talking too much?

- Do you offend others by talking too loudly?
- Do you disrespect others by interrupting?
- Do you listen (as opposed to just taking a breath between paragraphs)?

- Do you ask questions or just state opinions?
- Do you complain?
- Do you argue?

- Do you gossip? Proverbs 16:28 says, "A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends." Gossip (like its cousin, slander) is the sharing of information about others which is not your business to share. The fruit of gossip and slander is always damage to reputations, relationships, and the cause of Christ. If you play the role of "water-cooler reporter" or "rumor central" among your friends, take a look at Romans 1:28-32 and 2 Corinthians 12:20. You'll see that the Bible puts gossip in with some pretty ugly company.

Gossip cannot be trivialized or overlooked. Scripture actually commands church discipline for unrepentant gossiping, and it is important to note that the Bible specifically warns single women ("unmarried widows" in the text) about the temptation to gossip (1Ti 5:13).

Why the emphasis here on the sin of gossip? Because most pastors will tell you that nothing destroys long-standing friendships and ruptures Christian community like gossip. Once gossip has been passed along, there is no

5 Romans 12:13 tells us to “practice hospitality.” Which of the following is most like the kind of hospitality you practice?

“Sue held a formal state dinner last night...”

“Feel free to pick over whatever you find in the fridge...”

“Well, we can always watch a video...”

“Tonight’s topic on ‘Point/Counterpoint’ is...”

“Meet me in the chat room...”

Meditate on Proverbs

27:6, 9. Do you consider the rebuke of a friend a faithful wound or an irritating jab? Do you appreciate the earnest counsel of others regarding your character weaknesses? If so, why?

““ Seems like you know when I need you
Seems like He knows who to send
You never come as a prophet
Just an open-hearted friend
Faithfully wounding my pride
Bringing me back to His side
Sharing the word that you hide in your heart
You are a true friend, pointing me to Him
Lifting my downcast eyes
Turning my wandering gaze to the sky
Proving your love again
You are a true friend¹⁶

”
— Twila Paris

Set an example in faith. In the 1 Timothy passage, “faith” means a personal devotion to God that works itself down into our attitudes and actions. This is not super-spirituality, but a street-level trust in God. One reliable indicator of our faith is our attitude toward receiving correction from others. This acquired discipline will never make anyone’s Top Ten list of favorite activities, but it is vital for our growth and friendships. A friendship that cannot sustain the weight of loving correction will never experience the heavier glory of fellowship. In fact, Puritan

Charles Bridges counsels us that, “Rebuke, kindly, considerately, and prayerfully administered, cements friendship, rather than loosens it.”¹⁵

Our goal should go beyond simply tolerating confrontation; by God’s grace we can get to the point where we desire it, and even begin to see those who bring it as the best kind of friend. John Wesley demonstrated this in a reply to a letter of criticism received from someone he didn’t even know. Wesley’s gracious response indicates a depth of a faith that is attractive to all: “I am exceedingly obliged by the pains you have taken to point out to me what you think to be mistakes. It is a truly Christian attempt, an act of brotherly love....For what is friendship, if I am to account him my enemy who endeavors to open my eyes, or to mend my heart?”¹⁷

Set an example in purity.

The word Paul used here literally means “moral purity and innocence.” The same Greek word appears later in this letter, when Paul tells Timothy in no uncertain terms to relate to the young women “as sisters, with absolute purity” (1Ti 5:2). Later I will address some implications of this verse for courtship interactions, but its primary context has to do with the overall spectrum of relationships.

Brothers, it is in this mat-

relationships? Do you withdraw and send out little “hurt” signals? Do you get angry and vengeful, and turn a conflict into a test of wills? Or maybe you keep all your relationships just superficial enough to dodge those pesky meaningful commitments that make you care about how you treat a friend?

No matter how we try to avoid the yuckiness of conflict (and I’ve tried almost every tactic), it *will* find its way into our friendships because our natural self-orientation to life is constantly inviting it to move in, rent-free. In Chapter Two we discussed how to deal with this permanent tendency to focus on ourselves. I’d like now to offer a few suggestions on how to handle such self-generated relational conflict biblically.

In this section I am deeply indebted to Ken Sande for his outstanding book, *The Peacemaker*. It is one of my perennial Top 5 recommendations to people I counsel. I’ll just discuss some main points here (so make sure you read the book). *The Peacemaker* describes four biblical steps to resolving relational conflict.

Glorify God. During conflict, our habit should be to focus on the question, “How can I glorify God in this situa-

“ If you do not ‘glorify God’ when you are involved in a conflict, you will inevitably glorify someone or something else. By your actions you will show that you either have a big God or that you have a big self and big problems....If you do not focus on God you will inevitably focus on yourself and your will, or on other people and the threat of their will.¹⁹

— Ken Sande

tion?” This instantly takes our focus off ourselves and places it on God, who provides answers to even the most difficult relational challenges. Purposing to glorify God sends us to the Scriptures for perspective, to our knees for help, and to the Cross for mercy. Focusing first on God allows his immensity to dwarf our immediate problems. If all parties to the conflict seek to

glorify the Lord, the path to resolving disputes opens wide. Let’s make glorifying God our greatest goal in our conflicts.

Get the log out of your own eye. In Matthew 7:1-6, Jesus encourages us to first examine how *we* contribute to offense, and *then* focus on the other person’s offense. Focusing first on our sin will lead us to humility, repentance, and mercy—things that God will bless. For a long time I interpreted this passage as saying, “If you want to gain the right to judge someone else’s sin, judge your own sin first.” I was looking for a license to judge! One day, in wrestling with this passage over a conflict of my own, I

For Further Study:

Read Matthew 18:15-22. Do you understand the biblical process for helping another person deal with his or her sin against you? Do you follow this process?

Meditate on Matthew

5:23-24. What should you do if you have a conflict with someone just before your Sunday church meeting begins?

finally saw that the goal is not judgment but ministry.

Jesus is teaching that if you want to help someone with something harmful to him or her, you first need to deal with the thing that's harmful to you. During a conflict, the right to judge another person is never given to us. And the obligation to minister to one another is never removed.

Go and show your brother his fault. At times this step has appealed to me, as if it's supposed to be the fun part. It's not, and even thinking that way reveals a sinful, holier-than-thou motivation. Nor is this step about venting my anger and bitterness. It nearly always takes two people—each contributing their sin—to create a conflict. So in any conflict there must be a way for the specific offenses to be expressed, acknowledged, and dealt with. By God's grace, we *can* confront the sins of others in a helpful, non-judgmental way. We can also go and ask someone whether he or she has an offense against us.

As I develop the humility to tell others clearly and graciously of their sins against me, the same humility allows me not only to hear their offense against me, but to seek to repent of it. As I grow in the sincerity and completeness of my confession to others, a wonderful thing begins to happen. I experience fellowship.

Go and be reconciled. During the Cold War, the United States had a policy toward communist countries known as *détente*—literally “relaxing of tension.” If you're like me, you can live with conflict, it's the tension that gets on your nerves. But the Bible calls us to a far greater resolution than mere *détente*. It calls for reconciliation. Ken Sande says that to seek reconciliation is to “replace hostility and separation with peace and friendship”²⁰ Obviously, true reconciliation must involve the efforts of all parties to a conflict, so Paul encourages us, “As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Ro 12:18).

There are many things we can do to pursue peacemaking. We can forgive the other person; resolve to speak well of him or her; remain open to any effort at reconciliation; or get someone else involved in the manner of Matthew 18:15-16. Even if all our efforts fail to produce mutual reconciliation, we can live in the peace that we have glorified God and loved the way Jesus loves us.

The Hard-Won Prize of Friendship

Melanie is a member of our church, and a resident in a Sanctification House. She recently had an experience in

"I did not want to obey, but after a few days of praying (and crying), I knew it was time. It still was not easy, but I bought Mary a small gift and took it to her bedroom. I gave it to her, saying it was meant to symbolize a genuine effort at a new friendship, and I asked her to please forgive me for the selfishness I had displayed. She was very willing. We hugged for a long moment. When we separated she informed me that she now had renewed hope for the friendship she had been desiring to build with me for a long while.

"Since that day there has been nothing but harmony between us, and we enjoy spending time together. In two weeks it will be time for her to leave us and I can honestly say that, as a result of the work God has done in my heart, I will miss her dearly. I will carry this lesson with me forever and will give God the credit and honor due him. He prompted me to a step of spiritual growth and maturity, held my hand while I walked through the fire, and allowed me to experience the fullness of joy that comes only from submission and obedience to him. He has also given me a new friend!"

Taking a Cue from Clarence

There's a pivotal scene in "It's a Wonderful Life" where it begins to dawn on George Bailey that his life really is meaningless without the lives of others close to him. As the camera zooms in for a haunting close-up of George's tortured face, Angel Second Class Clarence Odbody reflects, "Each man's life touches so many other lives, and when he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?"

By the grace of God, Melanie and Mary are no longer absent from one another's lives. They have filled with hard-won friendship what was once a gaping hole between them. Whom does your life touch? Who touches you? Are there any holes in your relational network that can be replaced with meaningful fellowship? Invest in friendship. Be one to find one. ■

GROUP DISCUSSION 1. How would you respond to the question, "What is the greatest need that faith should meet?"

NOTES

1. Quoted by William J. Bennett in *The Book of Virtues* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 329.
2. *SAM Journal*, Sep/Oct 1996, p. 1.
3. Quoted by William J. Bennett in *The Book of Virtues*, p. 331.
4. Margaret Clarkson, *So You're Single!* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1978), p. 75, 85.
5. Quoted by Mark Shaw in *Ten Great Ideas from Church History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 209.
6. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1993), pp. 359-60.
7. Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, (Albany, OR: The SAGE Digital Library, 1996), p. 342.
8. *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 379.
9. John Loftness in C.J. Mahaney, ed., *Why Small Groups?* (Gaithersburg, MD: Sovereign Grace Ministries, 1996), p. 22.
10. Quoted by Jerry Bridges in *The Crisis of Caring* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1985), pp. 80-1.
11. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Spurgeon Sermon Collection* (Albany, OR: The SAGE Digital Library, 1996), p. 472.
12. J.C. Ryle, *Thoughts for Young Men* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 1996), p. 57.
13. Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root, eds., *The Quotable Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1989), p. 238.
14. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (Albany, OR: The SAGE Digital Library, 1996), p. 22.
15. Quoted in *Sovereign Grace*, July/August 1997, p. 3.
16. Twila Paris, "True Friend," (Ariose Music/ASCAP, 1988)
17. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (Albany, OR: The SAGE Digital Library, 1995), p. 74.
- 18.1 John 1:5-9.
19. Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), p. 22.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 170.