

For the last five weeks, we've been working at bringing Christ into the mix of all our relationships. We've talked about men and women, parents and children, co-workers and today ... friends. By way of review, let's look at the big picture. The first Sunday we talked about the meaning of faithfulness and the verse we keyed in on was from 1 Peter ... where he urges Jesus-followers to "*love one another deeply, from the heart.*" We learned that faithfulness in our horizontal relationships is about allowing the vertical relationship to shape everything we feel and project onto the people in our lives.

The second week we talked about what men wish women knew about men, and the third week we talked about what women wish men knew about women. Both weeks we focused on a verse from Paul's wisdom to the Ephesians, where he teaches, "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" Or, as *The Message* puts it, "*Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another.*" We learned through that phrase the importance of holding others in high esteem ... of understanding their needs so we can respect them. The fourth week, we talked to both teens and parents about the unique opportunity for spiritual growth in that relationship mix. We challenged our teens with a verse from 2 Timothy to "*set an example ... in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.*" And then we challenged parents and children in every life stage to **honor each other by understanding the nature of obedience, honor and respect.** We said that God's design for our relationships is a circle of respect ... God honoring children, children honoring parents, parents honoring God.

And then last week, we began to take these lessons beyond our family relationships and into the workplace. We discovered that in our work ... as Paul taught the Colossians ... *it is the Lord Christ we are serving* ... not humans, but Christ. Michael Pasquarello says the Ascension

means we are not in charge! Because Jesus is still alive and sitting in the presence of God, we don't make the rules. In *all* our relationships, it is the Lord Christ we are serving!

In the book of John, beginning at chapter 13, there is an interesting shift in how Jesus deals with his own friends. First, he does this radical thing where he gets down on his knees and washes their feet. He wants them to see what humility looks like ... that no one is somehow above serving someone else. Then with that image in mind, he tells them about the cross ... about his death and God's plan ... and *then* ... he shows them how to connect on a deep, spiritual level. He says, "Abide in me as I abide in you." In the margin of an old Bible, I wrote, "Hang out with me as I hang out with you." That's what Jesus wants from us. Friendship. That kind of *ahava* love we were talking about with the kids. Deep and abiding love. The kind that sees not obligation ... but the joy of hanging out with Jesus as he hangs out with us.

It brings us back to where we started, when we talked about the meaning of faithfulness. We said that first week of this series that the quality of our horizontal relationships depends on the quality of our vertical one ... so to get better horizontal relationships, hang out with Jesus. That's where Jesus begins in John, chapter fifteen, as he gets his friends ready for the long haul. First, he counsels them to abide in Christ *in the same way that* he abides in the Father. Then, he moves to the horizontal. He says (John 15:12-13) - ¹² *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.* ¹³ *Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.* In Jesus' case, that meant a literal death. More likely for us, it means I don't have to win every argument. I don't have to defend every perceived wrong. I don't have to live in fear of your response, because my faithfulness is a vertical equation, not a horizontal one. My value doesn't come from how you perceive me, but from the fact that I hang out with Jesus. So I can lay down my **SELF** ... because I'm constantly being filled up again by hanging out with Jesus.

Do you know what *ahava* means ... literally ... in Hebrew? It means, “I give.” So the most common Hebrew word for love literally means, “Give of yourself.” When Jesus got down on his knees and washed his disciples’ feet, he was giving them this most incredible picture of *ahava* love. Teaching them that love isn’t a feeling so much as a commitment.

Real friends give of themselves. The kind of friendship Jesus teaches ... the *ahava* kind ... is not benign detachment. It is not the kind of relationship where I enter in only so far as I feel safe. It is a sacrificial, transparent transaction ... giving in *both* directions. And here’s why *giving* is the key. First, giving is the very nature of God, so when we pull that kind of love down from our vertical relationship and put it into our horizontal relationships, we are pulling down the very power of God. When the giving happens in both directions, a kind of synergy happens. Second ... listen to this ... giving creates movement in the direction of God’s design. The movement of the world is in the direction of taking ... but the movement of the Kingdom is in the direction of giving. That’s why the cross is the symbol of everything God stands for. The cross is *ahava* love.

So ... pick a relationship you want to work on and diagnose it. A friendship. Is it a giving relationship or a taking relationship? Never mind the other person. How are *you* practicing *ahava* love? How are *you* washing the other person’s feet? Where is your pride interfering?

Now, I have to tell you ... this opened up a whole can of worms for me this week. I want to tell you what I discovered, but first I want to ask you to take out your cell phones again. Let’s do one of those instant polls, so we can get a good picture of where we are on this. To enter the poll, dial _____. I’ll give you a minute to dial that number.

Now, watch the screen for your options. The question is this: Where do you get your friends? Are your friends most likely to come from your family? From work? Or from church? Your

answer will be anonymous, so be at peace about that. Put in the number that corresponds to your answer.

Here's why I'm curious about this. I have a hunch that most people who follow Jesus don't consider the people at church as their closest friends. That's not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it is pretty healthy to have friends beyond the walls. But here's what I've noticed. I have noticed that we tend to have our family over here, and our friends over here (if we have friends), and our co-workers over here ... and our church over here. All in their little compartments. And often ... not always but often ... our relationship with our church tends to be more on the level of taking. Now, I'm not trying to push any buttons here ... but stop and think about it a minute: for many people, church is not where we invest our best. We often come with a taker's attitude. We come, we sit, we receive, and when we get mad, we leave. This is the place where we learn *ahava* love, but not usually where we practice it. I'm not talking about Mosaic specifically, but Church. The American Church. We have forgotten that this should be the most loving place in town ... the place where we invest the most ... where we give in such a way that its remarkable. Like washing feet.

Because ... that's what it means to follow Jesus. It means not just a willingness but an enthusiasm ... a passion ... for giving. Like Peter said, it means loving deeply, from the heart. So ... because Mosaic is my opportunity to express that ... and yours, too ... I wonder: In this place, with these people, do you love deeply, from the heart? Have you gotten past the "what have you done for me lately attitude" to the place where you are looking for ways to give of yourself? Are you ready to find friends *here*? If not, then here's a question I ask strictly as a spiritual guide and as a matter of respect: Why are you here?

Jesus said (John 15:14-15) - ¹⁴ *You are my friends if you do what I command.* ¹⁵ *I no longer call you servants, because servants do not know their master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.*

Here's a principle: It is about being transparent. Transparency is about trust and accountability. It means I can challenge you to become more than you are, without fear of your rejection. **Real friends trust (and can be trusted).** Trust is the foundation of a real friendship. And accountability is right in there with trust. That's about challenging each other at the character level.

When Billy Graham first started to become well known as an evangelist, he became aware of how easy it would be to lose his credibility. Just through the kinds of temptations that come with celebrity. Graham had three good friends that were on the journey with him ... Cliff Barrows, Beverly Shea and Grady Wilson. So one day, early on, Billy called these guys and asked them to meet him in Modesto, California. That meeting became a famous and defining moment in Billy Graham's ministry. Those four men knelt together in prayer and they sort of washed each other's feet in this way. They committed to hold each other accountable. In his autobiography, Billy writes: "In reality it did not mark a radical departure for us. We had always held these principles. It did, however, settle in our hearts and minds the determination that integrity would be the hallmark of both our lives and our ministry." That group of guys stayed together and stood together through more than fifty years of ministry ... helping each other keep that promise. Because of that willingness to hold each other accountable, there has never been even the slightest hint of a scandal in the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

Think how your life might be affected if you had friends you could give to on that level. Friends you could trust to call you out and hold you in without fear of rejection. There's

something for all of us in that ... but maybe especially for men. Guys need other guys to hold them accountable at the character level. And you know what? You need the relationship before you need the relationship. It takes time to develop the kind of trust that allows one person to speak truth into another's life like that. *Someone has said this: "When men fail to connect something terrible happens ... nothing. No discipleship, no accountability, no growth."*

So I come back to that question I asked earlier: are you ready to find friends here? What if you and two or three others got together and ... without any formal program ... what if you decided to meet weekly or even every other week or once a month at the Waffle House or wherever. And your purpose would be to give ... to make a sacrificial, transparent transaction. Yes, you'd shoot the breeze but you would also hold each other accountable ... so that by your giving of time and effort, you're building character and community. John Eldredge says every person needs a "small fellowship to walk with you, fight with you, and bandage your wounds." We need allies. Eldredge says, "Any time an army goes to war or an expedition takes to the field, it breaks down into little platoons and squads. Every chronicle of war or quest will tell you that the men and women who fought so bravely fought for each other."

That's what a group of spiritual friends can do for you. It's a few people who will fight for you. But only if you invest your best ... coming to the group not as a taker but as a giver.

Two more verses from that passage in John 15. Jesus said (John 15:16-17) - *You did not choose me, but I chose you* (in other words, I didn't sit around and wait for a group to happen ... I made one.) *and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.*¹⁷ *This is my command: Love each other.* The principle in this passage is this: **Real friends bear fruit.** Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 says -

*Two are better than one, because they have a **good return** for their labor (they bear fruit): ¹⁰ If they fall down, they can help each other up. But (listen to this) pity those who fall and have no one to help them up! ¹¹ Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? ¹² Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*

Do you remember we mentioned that a kind of synergy happens when you're not operating out of your own personal preferences or feelings, but building horizontally out of your vertical relationship? When we're working out of *ahava* love, there is a strength that develops. Things get built. *Ahava* friendships:

- **build character.** Because we are not afraid of rejection, we can be bold in raising each other up.
- **encourage accountability.** There is a level of trust in a real friendship that allows one person the freedom to challenge another person without shaking the foundation of the relationship. Accountability is about grace. It's about helping someone you love see something that they can not see in themselves.
- **extend forgiveness** ... the kind of forgiveness that refuses to hold on to an offense. I will tell you ... this is where the enemy does his best work among people who follow Jesus. He tries to develop in them a sense of righteous indignation, and gets them to become bitter ... offended at the least little thing. And Joyce Meyer says, "Bitterness always goes hand in hand with bondage." *Ahava* love battles that spirit of offense with a spirit of giving.

Peter said (1 Peter 1:22) - *Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, **love one another deeply, from the heart.***

Folks, this is all that separates those who authentically follow Jesus from those who simply go to church. **Real friends love deeply, from the heart.** This is all we have to offer the world. Real love. Green fire love. *Ahava* love. Really ... we don't have anything else to say worth saying. You know ... Rob Bell says, "The church has nothing to say to the world until it throws better parties."

So that is our challenge. To throw a better party. To create a joyful atmosphere grounded in the kind of supernatural love that comes only from God the Father, through Jesus Christ.

I'm going to invite you to hang out with Jesus for a few minutes. To just hang with him, as we take communion. Thank him for investing in you. Thank him for the cross ... the ultimate symbol of *ahava* love. Thank him for being your friend and for loving you enough to challenge you to a higher standard. Whether you claim to be his friend or not, I can tell you ... he is yours. No one loves you like Jesus.