

Better Relationships

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Date: 19 January 2025

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[0 : 01] Welcome here for this Sunday, January 19th, 2025. I was born on the coldest day of the coldest January in Edmonton history, which explains, I've said that in the past, it explains why part of it is still frozen up here, I think.

It's in perpetual permafrost. My name's Kent Dixon, and it is my joy truly to be the pastor here. I'm glad to be with you here again this morning as we take time to dig into God's Word and let it teach us something new or remind us of important truths and values that God has for us.

So speaking of the importance of things being better in our lives, we started a sermon series last week called, ironically, Better. So I hope that we're convinced that by living a life with Jesus, it's the best way to live.

I hope we believe that. And when we submit to Him in all things, our lives will be better. Last week, we looked at the impact that God can have in our lives when we begin the new year with better. Anybody remember? Thank you. Carol gets a gold star. So when we put God first in our lives, the rest of our lives will fall into order.

[1 : 21] Seek ye first, right? And all these things will be added, Scripture tells us. But if we get that backwards, giving our time and energy to smaller temporary things first, like unfortunate hockey games, the most important things in our lives will suffer, right?

We had that illustration last week with the small stones and the large ones. If we focus on our important priorities first, there's room for the other stuff.

But if we put the other stuff first, sometimes we run out of time. We run out of space in our lives. So this morning, we're going to consider how the people that we surround ourselves with, our relationships, have far-reaching effects for us.

And sometimes it's important for us to focus on having better relationships, on surrounding ourselves with people who also want to be better.

So in Dale Carnegie, you know the author? Familiar? He had a super popular book, which was titled *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Still a bestseller, I believe.

[2 : 31] So Carnegie gives some basic and, I believe, effective advice for developing meaningful relationships. He says, and there is a list of five, become genuinely interested in other people.

Does that make sense? People don't care how much you know. Here's the quote. People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Number two, smile. If you want to draw others to you, light up your face with a smile. Seems like simple advice. Number three, and I talked to somebody about this last week, remember names.

A person's name is the sweetest and most important sound to them. Do you believe it? I believe it. The other thing, too, is I think I've told this story before.

When I first came to Bramart, I'm brutal with names. Brutal. I have a terrible name memory. Good with faces, but bad with names. I prayed intentionally before I started as the pastor here, Lord, I need your help because I will not remember.

[3 : 40] And now, I still chuckle, but people will come to me and say, who's that again? And I go, oh, that's so-and-so, and that's their so-and-so, and that's God.

God just said, yeah, you do not have this, so let me help you. Be a good listener. Maybe that one's obvious. Maybe it's not. Encourage other people to talk about themselves.

Do you do that when you're in conversation with somebody? Have you ever had a conversation when someone is happy to relate everything in a conversation back to them? Have you ever had that experience?

Maybe you've done it. It's not that fun, and it doesn't feel like a conversation. Talk in terms, number five, talk in terms of the other person's interests.

And this relates to asking other people about what's important to them. Of these five relational instructions that Dale Carnegie gives, one or more of them have likely been particularly helpful in your own life and experiences.

[4 : 42] So give some thought to that. The truth is that you and I were created for relationships, and not just with God, but with each other.

We were designed to live our best lives when we do it in the context of community. The problem is that we don't always choose the right people to surround ourselves with as we go through life. Can you relate to that? Can you think of, oh, that was a bad choice I made? So these are things that we could often do better. And the Bible gives us some practical wisdom for living in healthy community with one another.

So if you want to grab your Bibles, do it. Proverbs 12, 26. Proverbs is such a great source for wisdom. Proverbs 12, 26 says, So what we're learning there is that people who live righteous lives are the people who choose their friends carefully.

Those things are directly tied in Scripture. So this means that rather than living our closest relationships to chance, do we do that? I think we do that sometimes.

[5 : 59] We may actually make a concerted effort to surround ourselves with people who are chosen carefully. It's an important value. Good relationships. People who are seeking a path of righteousness in their lives know the kind of person that they want to be, I hope.

So they choose to surround themselves with people who help them achieve those goals, help them to be better. And the righteous look for people who help them to become better versions of themselves.

Does that make sense? The righteous seek out people who love God with their whole hearts and live that out each day. Now, I'm not saying all your relationships have to be with people who love God, because where's your witness?

It's squelched, right? But I'm saying that those key developmental relationships, those discipleship relationships, need to be with people who love your God just as much, if not more, than you do, and can be an example for you.

Some people just don't have our best interests in mind. If you had relationships like that. Some people don't live based on a desire to please God.

[7 : 18] We see that in society all around us. Some people don't make us better. And in fact, some people can actually contribute to making us bitter.

Have you ever been around someone who's got a bad attitude or is cranky all the time? Does it bring that out in you? Does it tend to? Or do you ever feel like, maybe this is not the best relationship for me to be in?

So I'm going to hurt people who are graffiti artists. I thought of Connor as a, not that Connor's a graffiti artist, but he'll be challenging me about this illustration. But the differences between positive relationships and negative ones can be compared to the difference between graffiti and an art gallery.

So he's going, yeah. So no disrespect to any talented graffiti artists here. Everybody's putting their spray cans away.

But graffiti, I think we can agree, tends to be haphazard for the most part, right? It can be messy, especially when it's not good graffiti. Drive by a CN rail yard and tell me what you think.

[8 : 28] There's good and bad. But it's messy often. And certainly it's unpredictable. I think that's fair. And an art gallery tends to be different unless you're going to an avant-garde collection.

Graffiti is chaotic, but an art gallery tends to be curated. Is that fair? I think that's fair. An art gallery tends to be strategic.

It is thought through in many ways. So there's an art behind building relationships. It's an art form in many ways.

I don't know if you ever thought of it that way, but it really is. And it can be seen as being similar to an art gallery. Because if we leave our closest connections to accidental encounters, we may find ourselves being led to places that we never wanted to go.

Have you ever had that happen? I've certainly had that happen to me. I've been in relationships or friendships and wound up being the kind of person that I never wanted to be. But when we look at the life of Jesus, we see a better way to develop relationships.

[9 : 41] Like Jesus knew what he was doing. Jesus spent time with a lot of people, right? Thousands at times. Or large, small, medium, and large kinds of groups.

But while he spent time with larger groups, they weren't his primary focus. Have you ever thought about that before? Instead, we have a group of 12 apostles, and he did most of his life with them. He did life, as that expression goes, with them. He ate with them. He slept with them. He ministered with them. He listened. I think they argued.

They laughed. And even within that group of 12, even closer relationships existed. Jesus had close, close relationships with Peter and James and John.

Relationships where he really invested his time and his energy. And we can recognize that in the Gospels. We can see that play out in Jesus' ministry.

[10 : 46] In his focus of his time and his attention. And Jesus didn't leave his friendships to chance. That's something that we can learn from him. He chose them wisely.

And we should do the same. Now, look for godly attributes. What does that mean? Well, the only way we can avoid relationships that are by chance and develop friendships that are by choice is by looking for characteristics in other people that look like Jesus and, in turn, encourage us towards him.

Encourage us to be closer in our relationship with him. And the Apostle Paul writes about this in his letter to the early church in Corinth. And the reason Paul puts this into his letter is because the struggle to surround ourselves with the right people is not new.

This is not a new thing. It's human nature and it's been going on for a very long time. So, turn to 1 Corinthians 13, 4-7.

You know the passage as soon as I say the first couple words. Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy.

[12 : 05] It does not boast. It is not proud. It does not dishonor others. It is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects. Always trusts. Always hopes.

Always perseveres. You know the passage? It's familiar. It's often quoted in weddings. We actually had it read at our wedding.

But it has a much broader application than that. Because what Paul is outlining there is what true relationships, relationships that are built on the love of God, should look like in our lives.

These are characteristics of the kinds of relationships we should be seeking. So as I read through these simple yet profound characteristics, it's a good list. And I can't help but think that those are the kinds of relationships that I want in my life.

[13 : 11] I don't know about you, but as I get older, my relationships, my important ones that I deeply invest in or that I return to, are mutual.

They feed me and give me life and love and care as much as I give it out. They're reciprocal. They're healing. They're meaningful.

And they direct me towards Jesus. I want to be with people who are patient. People who are kind. Because I can be impatient sometimes.

I'm kind pretty much. I want to trust people who are not self-seeking and proud. My pride radar goes off real quick.

So if I'm with someone in a conversation who is more interested in telling me all about them, I tire of it fairly quickly. Being aware of the people that are in our sphere of influence and noticing when someone demonstrates the qualities that Paul has given us just may be the best way to develop a better relationship with people in the new year.

[14 : 24] Have you ever said goodbye to a relationship? Have you ever kind of thought to yourself, oh, time is, time is, this has run out. So whether it's run its course and there's nothing more for either person to get out of it or it's unhealthy or whatever, it can be hard to walk away because we've become so familiar and comfortable in something that wasn't really that great for us.

It's human nature sometimes to be the froggy in a pot of water, right? Sometimes the water has to get pretty hot before we'll hop out of it, right? And that's true.

A good friend with the kinds of characteristics that Paul has given us here is someone who makes us feel safe. Someone who makes us feel loved and supported.

Some of the greatest friendships that I have had in my life, and I still have, are because they tend to fit, and I reflected on this, they fit this passage really well. Many of those relationships that I have, that I reflected on, were forged also or strengthened through adversity, through challenge, through conflict at times.

And many of those friendships and relationships are as important to me today, if not more so, than when they first began. That's a true relationship, a true friendship.

[15 : 53] I want to share a story. Now, I did some research, because I'm a research guy, you know that? So I read this illustration, I thought, this is really great. And I thought, but is it true? That's my radar, right?

So, people say it's a nice story, not necessarily true. I think it's a great story, so take it for that.

Jackie Robinson was the first black athlete to play Major League Baseball.

Breaking baseball's color barrier, he faced jeering crowds in every stadium where he competed. And while playing one day in his home stadium in Brooklyn, New York, he committed an error on the field.

That never happens to professional athletes, right? The fans began to ridicule him. He stood at second base, humiliated while the fans heckled him mercilessly.

And it was at the height of that tension when he felt most alone that suddenly shortstop Pee Wee Reese came over and stood next to him. Reese put his arm around Robinson and faced the crowd with him.

[16 : 58] The fans grew silent. Robinson later said that an arm around a shoulder like that saved his career. Some of us this morning may need someone like Pee Wee Reese in our lives.

Someone who's willing to come up and stand next to us when no one else will. Who will face the challenges of life with us when no one else will. Someone else who will face the jeering crowds so we don't have to do it alone.

Do you have someone who embodies the patience, the kindness, the humility, the love, the truth, and the joy that Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians?

If not, I will pray for you. But make that a top priority for you this year. By doing everything in your power and praying for God to send someone to you like that.

Submit that request to God. Ask him to guide you to that safe person that you need. Someone you can trust. Someone who will support and encourage you on every journey.

[18 : 15] And will laugh with you and will cry with you. That way when life throws you the difficult circumstances that often come. Anyone not have different difficult circumstances in their lives?

Anyone? Not a single hand goes up. Interesting. The human condition. When you lose a job, when you are going through marriage struggles, when you are facing addiction, when you are struggling with sinful temptation in your life, you don't have to do it alone.

As important as it is for us to be on the lookout for godly friendships, there's also, here it comes, there's also a very important aspect to better relationships that often goes unlooked.

You ready? What kind of friend am I? Well, I'm going to start with this. How to be miserable.

This is an article that I found. The author, it comes from a publication, 1993, comes from a publication called Daily Walk. And they published this article called How to Be Miserable.

[19 : 30] Ready? Though the author is unknown, the writing is maybe a bit dated, but I think we can agree that it's tongue-in-cheek, clearly, but there's good advice here.

It says, think about yourself. Talk about yourself. Use I as often as possible. Mirror yourself continually, and I talked about this, in the opinion of others.

Oh, well, that happened to me. And I did it better, whatever. You hear that? Listen greedily to what other people say about you. Expect to be appreciated.

Be suspicious. Be jealous and envious. Be sensitive to slights. Never forgive a criticism. Trust nobody but yourself.

Insist on consideration and respect. Demand agreement with your own views on everything. Sulk if people are not grateful to you for favors shown to them.

[20 : 34] Never forget a service that you have rendered. Shirk your duties if you can, and do as little as possible for others. Some of it sting.

Sometimes some of it stings. So the advice that's given here is meant to be ironic. Mostly. And if it's taken literally, it's an excellent way to live your life isolated.

Alone. Grouchy. Anyone for bitter? If taken literally, it's an excellent way to live your life badly. To live your life upset.

Frustrated. Disappointed. Feeling like the world and everyone in it is less than you are.

Undeserving. Ungrateful. It's a prescription for an unhappy life.

Now, Jesus is our greatest example. There's a shock, right? But I want to talk, it's not on the slide, but the truth is that in order for us to have better relationships, we must be someone for whom others want to develop a relationship.

[21 : 48] Right? That's the other side of that coin. We need to ask ourselves regularly and be able to answer, here's the hard part, honestly, are we the kind of people God wants us to be?

If you're really honest, what kind of friend are you? Rhetorical question, mostly, but I want you to think about it. Are you trustworthy?

Or do you share information that you've been told in confidence? Are you kind? Or only when it benefits you?

Are you forgiving? Or do you hold slights against other people? Do you have other people's best interests in mind? Or are you looking to further your own interests?

Paul writes about this need, Paul is good at writing good advice, a need for an others-focused life in the book of Romans. Romans 12, verse 10, Paul says, be devoted to one another in love.

[22 : 56] Honor one another above yourselves. That's good advice. What Paul's doing here is giving instruction for individuals to live in meaningful relationships with each other.

So the qualities that he gave, he then moves on in Romans and talks about submitting to others in love, caring for others in love. He's encouraging us to be people who make a conscious decision to be devoted to other people out of love.

This word for love that Paul uses is the word Philadelphia. So why is that word, the city, called city of brotherly love?

So that makes it clear why it's called that. It comes from the Greek words phileo, which means love, and adelphus, which means brother. Philadelphia.

Paul is inviting us to love other people as brothers and sisters in Christ. Christ. So there's a deep connection there that comes from being members of God's family.

[24 : 08] Paul also then says that we ought to honor one another above ourselves. And that's actually the critical piece of that passage. Because without putting other people first and honoring them by the way that we treat them, there's really no way to build a better relationship that's not somehow one-sided.

Do you see that? Jesus is our greatest example. Hopefully it's not a surprise to us that Jesus is the greatest example for building better relationships.

Jesus is the greatest example for everything, pretty much. But we can see that here in his behavior, in the way he treated people. He was the standard for living for humility and service.

Jesus set the bar. Through his life, death, and resurrection, he demonstrated, like no one else has ever been able to do, what it means to love others well.

So in this new year, make a commitment to surround yourself with people who challenge and motivate you towards Jesus, to becoming more like him in all that you say and all that you do.

[25 : 23] pay close attention to the kinds of fruit that your closest friends demonstrate, the people that are closest to you and your closest relationships. But, pay even closer attention to your own fruit.

Make sure you're the kind of person who would encourage and support people who choose to have a relationship with you. I don't think we think too often or certainly not often enough about the kind of people that we are to others in relationships.

But it's critically important. It's always wise, and we've talked about this already in this series, at the beginning of this year, this time of year, to step back in many things and evaluate.

And perhaps better relationships are exactly what you need. Let's pray. Father God, thank you that you have not called us to a solitary life and journey as followers of your son, Jesus.

You've given us the companionship and friendship of other people to encourage and support us. thank you for the valued relationships that help us to make it through.

[26 : 40] We thank you for your help to be wise and discerning in the friendships that we choose and to honor those who choose to have friendships and relationships with us.

Father, guide us to the friendships and relationships that will serve us well in this life and help us to be better in being the kinds of friends to others that you would have us be.
We pray all these things in your name. Amen.