

ANOINTING YOUR FRIENDSHIPS

By Rev. Will Nelken

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The Holy Spirit is responsible for anointing your friendships—that means, arranging for you to make new friends, deepening your awareness and trust of your friends, and generating a fruitful impact from them.

Recently, I showed you the Wheel of Discipleship, which describes the essential components of a full Christian life. The Second Quadrant of the wheel (3-6 o'clock) represents your connections with others through Christian Community Life.

The Christian life is designed to be lived *together*. Do you know why? Because Christianity is about family—the Family of God. The union of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is so good that God created humans to share it with Him.

The Christian life is dangerous when it is lived *alone*. Do you know why? Because the human heart is gullible and sin is deceptive, and you are sure to stumble and fall, if you don't receive accountability and support from someone else.

No Lone Rangers!

There is a far-too-common brand of Christian religion that emphasizes appearance over substance and form over essence—evidenced by a driving concern for what others may think of you. This makes for shallow people, shallow relationships, and shallow faith.

But is the only alternative a series of group hugs, sensitivity training, and endless expressions of personal foibles? I sincerely hope not!

Last Sunday, I emphasized the need for deepening our devotional life—getting closer to Jesus and becoming more like Him.

However, that cannot be achieved in a vacuum.

Blind Spots

If you try to get closer to Jesus all by yourself, your (necessarily) myopic view of the Savior will stunt your growth. You need others to shed light on your “blind spots.”

Every human being with eyesight has a physiological blindspot—something like a hole in the retina where the optic nerve passes through it. At that precise location, there are no photoreceptor cells, so the incoming light is not translated as vision—it is a blank spot.

It is not normally perceived because your brain interpolates an image, based on surrounding detail and information from your other eye. But you can test it for yourself...

Hold this page away from your face, about three times the distance between the R and the L below. Then close your right eye and stare steadily at the L with your left eye. The R will disappear from sight! Now close your left eye and stare at the R with your right eye, and the L will disappear.

R

L

Similarly, we all have intellectual and emotional “blind spots” for which we need information gathered from other people’s perspectives.

In fact, that’s one reason that the Bible includes four accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus. Four authors, writing from four perspectives, provides a circumspect view of the God-man, Jesus Christ.

In his excellent book, *Soulprint: Discovering Your Divine Destiny* (page 117), Pastor Mark Batterson describes the view of one’s soul through the Johari Window.



“The Johari Window is a fascinating matrix on the study of human personality. I got my first peek through the window during a graduate course in psychology. Like a four-pane window, the four quadrants reveal four dimensions of one’s identity. As you look through the different panes, you are taken to new places in self-discovery. Looking through the Johari Window is like seeing your soulprint from four different angles.

“The first window, the arena (public) quadrant, consists of those things you know about you and others know about you. This is who you are when everybody is looking. It is your public persona. It’s what everybody sees and knows about you, but it is only the tip of the identity iceberg.

“The next window, the façade (hidden) quadrant, consists of those things you know about you but others don’t know about you. This is who you are when nobody is looking. It’s who you are after you get past the polite superficialities. Behind the façade are the deep disappointments you’ve never reconciled, the hidden dreams you’ve never verbalized, and the secret sins you’ve never come to grips with. This is the person you know you are, for better or for worse, but sometimes are afraid to reveal.

“The third window, the blind-spot quadrant, consists of those things others know about you but you don’t know about you. This is what others see in you but you cannot see in yourself. This is where you need prophets in your life who see the potential in you that you cannot see in yourself. This is also where you need true friends who have the courage to confront things in you that need to change. If you don’t have someone who has permission to openly and honestly speak into your life, your blind spots will never be revealed.

“The fourth and final window is the unknown quadrant, and it consists of those things you don’t know about you and others don’t know about you. This quadrant of your soulprint—your true identity before God—is made up of the things that are invisible to everyone except the All-Seeing Eye. And this is where the Holy Spirit plays such a vital role in your life. Until you see yourself through His eyes, you’ll never get a vision of who you can become. The key to self-discovery is allowing the One who knit you together in your mother’s womb to reveal things you do not and cannot know about yourself without His revelation. God knows you better than you know you, because He designed you, so if you want to get to know yourself, you’ve got to get to know God. In the words of C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, ‘Your real, new self... will not come as long as you are looking for it. It will come when you are looking for Him.’”

Batterson made two points that are significant to our topic today. First, concerning the blind-spot quadrant, he said, “You need true friends who have the courage to confront things in you that need to change. If you don’t have someone who has permission to openly and honestly speak into your life, your blind spots will never be revealed.”

Second, concerning the unknown quadrant, he said, “This is where the Holy Spirit plays such a vital role in your life. Until you see yourself through His eyes, you’ll never get a vision of who you can become.”

These two added ingredients—true friends and the Holy Spirit—are what create real community and broaden your life’s experience and meaning beyond your natural limitations to spiritual fullness.

Alone, But Not Alone

Community is the opposite of isolation. But it is not the opposite of being alone. If you're not comfortable in your own skin, you won't be comfortable in community. Isolation, however, breeds self-centeredness on the one hand, and despair on the other.

Community is not the same as communal living. Many have tried to force community through communal living arrangements, but they failed more than they succeeded, because community is not the result of close physical proximity. In fact, the Internet, and social networks like MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter, have demonstrated that community may actually begin without any physical proximity. Eventually, a physical meeting will become desirable, if not necessary, but community is essentially spiritual, not physical.

Even shared interests and shared experiences, which can be community builders, are not required at the outset. Community is essentially spiritual, not emotional.

Community begins with the recognition that we were made to live together—to learn, to grow, to help, to encourage one another. Think of all the New Testament verses that tell us how to treat “one another.”

How can we truly discover that “*we all belong to each other*” (Romans 12:5) and “*live in harmony with each other*” (Romans 12:16), if we do not spend time together practicing deference and compassion as we listen carefully to each other's story?

Where else can we get past jealousy and quarreling and condemning each other to practice acceptance, patience, and care for each other, if not in small groups that meet regularly with that as one of their purposes?

When will we find opportunity to teach, counsel, and warn each other, or encourage, build up and “*motivate one another to acts of love and good works*” (Hebrews 10:24) if we do not make the time to get to know each other, to understand each other, and love each other in community?

What Is Your Intention?

If we miss this, we will become grumpy Christians—distrusting each other, grumbling about each other, condemning each other, arguing with each other, lying to each other, hating and betraying each other. It's all there in your Bible!

And the answer is intentional community. Doing life together. Serving Christ together. That's where true friendships are discovered and developed.

And at the very heart of this is the person and power of the Holy Spirit. It is with His grace and guidance that I can learn (and you can learn) what it is to be a true friend, because He is a Friend to everyone.

The fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) is *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”* These are easily recognized as the sterling elements of close friendship.

Not only that, but the needs (and the arena) for the creation of these fruit are exactly the kind of challenges that developing community and growing friendships will expose you to.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are the answers to interpersonal issues. They all involve and touch other people, not you alone. They are not ends in themselves, but means to a common end: functional community.

And this is where the fullness of the Christian life is found. You may taste “fullness” in personal spiritual experiences, but genuine overflowing fullness is reserved for the context of... community. It is a “together” experience!

Paul prayed (Ephesians 3:14-17): *“¹⁴ For this reason, I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”*

The reason that prompted Paul’s prayer was the new union of Jews and Gentiles in Christ—God’s “*whole family in heaven and earth.*” And the end for which he prayed was the fulfillment of that union.

Every occasion of the pronouns “you” and “your” in this passage is in the plural form (not singular!). This prayer, which we have often been led to think of as a personal promise of God’s gracious love, is, in fact, a *communal* promise! It is what God will do *among us* as we are united in His Spirit.

Paul continued praying (Ephesians 3:17-19): *“And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”*

You need not, and you *cannot* “grasp how wide and long and high and deep” the love if Christ is outside of the Christian community. It is only in facing one another—in our great variety of personalities, experiences, understandings, gifts, weaknesses, sins, faith and faltering—that we will be awed and amazed at how magnificently Jesus loves us!

Smaller Is Better, Together

How shall we do this? By coming together, especially in small groups.

To worship together. To study together. To pray together. To serve together.

As the apostle admonished us in his letter to the Hebrew Christians (Hebrews 10:25): “*Let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of His return is drawing near.*”

Don’t “*neglect our meeting together*”! It’s in the Book. But there are so many alternatives in our culture, so many conflicts in our schedules, and we grow so weary of the pace. I think, “I need some ‘me-time.’” “I need a vacation.”

Is that really the answer? Haven’t you returned from times off still feeling unrested? The Sabbath was not designed as a personal getaway. It was meant to be a *corporate rest*. Families and near neighbors would spend the day *together*, contemplating and discussing and rejoicing in the great goodness of God.

“*Encourage one another*”? To what end? To no other end but to keep meeting together, especially as the return of Jesus draws close. For Jesus has told us that in the Last Days “*sin will be rampant everywhere, and the love of many will grow cold*” (Matthew 24:12). Paul also warned of those days when people will “*love only themselves and their money*” and the fruit of the Spirit will be forsaken, and “*they will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly*” (2 Timothy 3:1-5). Are these those days?

Meeting together in small groups—to worship, to study, to pray, and to serve. Not that large groups are ineffective, but in certain ways they are counter-productive. We can do all of those same things in large groups (and we *should* at times), but not with the same effect. Worship, study, prayer, and service have a deeper (and more lasting) effect in more intimate settings.

Small groups... is why our church’s vision (including the remodel of this building) is not about increased seating space. Instead, it’s about more versatile seating spaces—multiple configurations and multiple locations. Growth in numbers will be accommodated, not by more seats in a single room, but by more gatherings, at more times and in more places.

We want to do church in a small way (meaning, closer fellowship), and have a BIG impact! Both for you, and for the wider unchurched community around us.

Personal *and* social transformation are our aims.

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

The apostle summed up my thoughts perfectly: *"Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God"* (Hebrews 12:15).

This is your job: *"Look after each other."* Don't just think about satisfying your own interests, but consider the interest of others. This is not an invitation to meddle in other people's business, or to dominate or control other people, but to sincerely care about them and their spiritual progress in the faith of Jesus.

This is your aim: *"So that none of you fails to receive the grace of God."* None. Not one. That will only happen if we look after each other. It will not happen if we neglect or ignore or despise each other.

"So that none of you fails to receive the grace of God." God's grace is absolutely necessary for every one of us. *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast"* (Ephesians 2:8-9; ESV).

Mercy is when God does not give you what you deserve. Grace is when He gives you what you do not deserve. You do not deserve to be forgiven. You do not deserve to be saved. You do not deserve community. You do not deserve Heaven.

But these, and so much more, are God's gifts to you through Jesus Christ. They've been given for you. But have you received them?

"So that none of you fails to receive the grace of God." Nothing would be more tragic, more catastrophic—in light of *"how wide and long and high and deep"* the love of Christ is—than to be given so great a salvation and fail to receive it!

This failure could happen to any individual on the planet. And it cannot be prevented by any individual. My safety—your safety—must be the result of a group effort.

"Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God."

NO LONE RANGERS!

Holy Spirit, anoint our friendships, build our community of faith, grow healthy disciples of Jesus Christ.

Lead us to love God, love people, and touch the world... *together!*