

Relationships are the currency of God's Kingdom. Nothing else is as valuable in the culture of heaven as our intimate connection to God and one another. There is probably nothing greater that will help us in our own spiritual lives than having a few people in our lives that we are deeply connected to.

I am talking about a depth and commitment that separates "hanging out" from life-transforming interdependence. Real friendship is forged best in the heat of battle. When your relationship is tested by conflict you will know what you have. Lasting friendships use every obstacle as a means to know each other deeply and reinforce an enduring commitment to each other's good.

One of the greatest needs in today's Christianity is for men and women who will do life with others. Men and women who will engage in a deep way with those that they can influence and stand beside.

There is nothing our world needs more than consistent relationships and perhaps nothing defines our world more than the brokenness of relationships.

If we are not careful our church can fall into the chasm of institutionalism programs and projects become more important than people. We often evaluate others on their ability to generate excellent work and not their ability to nurture excellent relationships. We are often tempted to be consumed with production and performance instead of authentic relationships. I am afraid that sometimes the church world overvalues organizational structure for ministry rather than on organic, spontaneous connections of people ministering to one another's needs.

This is a big idea for us to grasp but I am going to call us to some things that I believe will mark us as vibrant Christians.

Again I am using a story from the Old Testament to draw some conclusions from regarding relationships. Here is the story:

One day Jonathan said to his armor bearer, "Come on, let's go over to where the Philistines have their outpost." But Jonathan did not tell his father what he was doing.

² *Meanwhile, Saul and his 600 men were camped on the outskirts of Gibeah, around the pomegranate tree^[a] at Migron. . . .*

No one realized that Jonathan had left the Israelite camp. ⁴ To reach the Philistine outpost, Jonathan had to go down between two rocky cliffs that were called Bozez and Seneh. ⁵ The cliff on the north was in front of Micmash, and the one on the south was in front of Geba. ⁶ "Let's go across to the outpost of those pagans," Jonathan said to his armor bearer. "Perhaps the LORD will help us, for nothing can hinder the LORD. He can win a battle whether he has many warriors or only a few!"

⁷ “Do what you think is best,” the armor bearer replied. “I’m with you completely, whatever you decide.”

⁸ “All right then,” Jonathan told him. “We will cross over and let them see us. ⁹ If they say to us, ‘Stay where you are or we’ll kill you,’ then we will stop and not go up to them. ¹⁰ But if they say, ‘Come on up and fight,’ then we will go up. That will be the LORD’s sign that he will help us defeat them.”

¹¹ When the Philistines saw them coming, they shouted, “Look! The Hebrews are crawling out of their holes!” ¹² Then the men from the outpost shouted to Jonathan, “Come on up here, and we’ll teach you a lesson!”

“Come on, climb right behind me,” Jonathan said to his armor bearer, “for the LORD will help us defeat them!”

¹³ So they climbed up using both hands and feet, and the Philistines fell before Jonathan, and his armor bearer killed those who came behind them. ¹⁴ They killed some twenty men in all, and their bodies were scattered over about half an acre. ^[b]

¹⁵ Suddenly, panic broke out in the Philistine army, both in the camp and in the field, including even the outposts and raiding parties. And just then an earthquake struck, and everyone was terrified. 1 Samuel 14:1-15 NLT

People matter to God so they should matter to us. What are you doing to build authentic relationships with others? I am talking about relationships where you have a chance to influence and be influenced. To survive spiritually in this world we must realize that we face a daily struggle and battle.

The bible talks about fighting the “strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh and blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, and against evil spirits in heavenly places.” (Eph. 6:11-12) Do you think that you can your spiritual enemies without a few relationships that are utterly committed to your good?

I’m talking about relationships with friends that you have invested in during peaceful times and who prove themselves in the hard times.

1. An important pursuit: Quality and Quantity matter

One day Jonathan said to his armor bearer, “Come on, let’s go over to where the Philistines have their outpost.”

The relationship between a soldier and his armor bearer was unique. In the case of this story you have Jonathan, the son of King Saul, and a man chosen to spend every waking hour with him to carry his armor. This relationship would have meant hour’s together, conversation about life, and just doing life together. Because they were friends they were

able to act together in this story. Because they were friends they trusted and knew one another.

Christians want to connect with other people. You will want to do this for a variety of reasons. Christians ought to be the most gracious people in the world. We should look out for the needs of others and not just our own needs according to the Bible.

According to Joseph Myers in his book, *The Search to Belong*, there are four spaces where connections take place in our lives. I am not going to take a long time talking about them individually but I think it gives us context for managing our times and relationships.

Public space This is one that most of never think about. These are the people you see in public and they feel as if they know you. It could be the waitress or waiter from a place you frequent. It could be the person at the gas station that you have brief conversations with or the bank teller or the checkout person at the grocery. In the context of the church we should have a lot of relationships with the people within these walls. This is a minimal level of relationship but can be very powerful if we do our best to be friendly to others that we do not know.

Social space This is a little closer network of people that you share space with in your life and you have opportunity to socialize with these folks. Social relationships can be very draining but they are important at times to maintain a network of people that affect your life.

Personal belonging This is a network of people in whom you confide. You tell your experiences, your thoughts and feelings.

Intimate belonging This can intimate but that is not the only way I am talking about today. Sometimes someone comes into our lives that we share everything with. We are not ashamed to be honest and we don't hide the real us.

I know that some of us struggle with this for a variety of reasons. I know we aren't all extroverts so you have to figure out what you can do and what you can't do.

Charlie brown asks Linus "What would you do if you felt that nobody liked you?" Linus responds "Well Charlie Brown I guess I would take a real hard look at myself, ask if I am doing anything that turns people off, How can I improve myself? Do I need to change in some way? Yep that's my answer Charlie Brown." Charlie Brown says, "I hate that answer." It is an important pursuit!

2. An intentional plan: Roles and Rules

⁴ *To reach the Philistine outpost, Jonathan had to go down between two rocky cliffs that were called Bozez and Seneh.* ⁵ *The cliff on the north was in front of Micmash, and the one on the south was in front of Geba.* ⁶ *"Let's go across to the outpost of those pagans,"*

Jonathan said to his armor bearer. "Perhaps the LORD will help us, for nothing can hinder the LORD. He can win a battle whether he has many warriors or only a few!"

Jonathan had an intentional plan. He shared it with his armor bearer. He was not going to do it alone but because he had a friend and companion in his life's journey he was able to enlist his support. He was intentional about his relationship and about his venture.

You and I must be very intentional about relationships or they just won't happen. Dale Carnegie wrote a book not quite a hundred years ago. I have given a lot of copies of it away. It is a classic. *How to Win Friends and Influence People* has sold millions of copies.

Let me just give you some practical suggestions on how to be friendly toward others.

1. Become genuinely interested in other people: *"You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you."*
2. Smile
3. Remember that a person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language.
4. Be a good listener. Encourage the other person to talk about themselves.
5. Talk about what interest the other person and not always what interest you.
6. Make the other person feel important and do it sincerely.

Some of you might wonder why I would preach or teach those things. Christians ought to be the most self-aware people in the world. We should always be looking to make friends and interact with others. You never know when or how God will use you if you work on yourself in this area.

Mamie Adams always went to a branch post office in her town because the postal employees there were friendly. She went there to buy stamps just before Christmas one year and the lines were particularly long. Someone pointed out that there was no need to wait in line because there was a stamp machine in the lobby. "I know," said Mamie, "but the machine won't ask me about my arthritis." You have to be intentional about it.

3. An inspired protection: Back to back

⁷ *"Do what you think is best," the armor bearer replied. "I'm with you completely, whatever you decide."*

"Come on, climb right behind me," Jonathan said to his armor bearer, "for the LORD will help us defeat them!"

¹³ *So they climbed up using both hands and feet, and the Philistines fell before Jonathan, and his armor bearer killed those who came behind them. ¹⁴ They killed some twenty men in all, and their bodies were scattered over about half an acre.^l*

I love a lot about this story. I love that the armor bearer was totally in agreement with Jonathan. I love the fact that they acted together. One was not better than the other. They were blessed by God as they stood back to back and fought the enemy.

Community and Relationships are not just something that some author somewhere dreamed up.

We need to have people in our circle of friends who...

- Coach and mentor us
- Stretch us
- Listen to our dreams
- Protect us and show mercy
- Offers reliable judgment
- Serves with us Gordon MacDonald pointed out that it is no fun to do acts of Christian service alone. There can be a strong bond between those who serve and who do it together.
- Who loves us enough to rebuke us
- Who seeks God with us
- Who has fun with you

Rick Warren writes in “The Purpose Driven Life,” “I have been at the bedside of many people in their final moments, when they stand on the edge of eternity, and I have never heard anyone say, “Bring me my diplomas! I want to look at them one more time. Show me my awards, my medals, that gold watch I was given.” When life on earth is ending, people don’t surround themselves with objects. What we want around us is people – people we love and have relationships with. In our final moments we all realize that relationships are what life is all about. Wisdom is learning that truth sooner rather than later. Don’t wait until you’re on your deathbed to figure out that nothing matters more.”

4. An invincible power: Healthy relationships change the whole community

¹⁶ *Saul’s lookouts in Gibeah of Benjamin saw a strange sight—the vast army of Philistines began to melt away in every direction.* ¹⁷ *“Call the roll and find out who’s missing,” Saul ordered. And when they checked, they found that Jonathan and his armor bearer were gone.*

¹⁸ *Then Saul shouted to Ahijah, “Bring the ephod here!” For at that time Ahijah was wearing the ephod in front of the Israelites.*^[c] ¹⁹ *But while Saul was talking to the priest, the confusion in the Philistine camp grew louder and louder. So Saul said to the priest, “Never mind; let’s get going!”*^[d]

²⁰ *Then Saul and all his men rushed out to the battle and found the Philistines killing each other. There was terrible confusion everywhere.* ²¹ *Even the Hebrews who had previously gone over to the Philistine army revolted and joined in with Saul, Jonathan, and the rest of the Israelites.* ²² *Likewise, the men of Israel who were hiding in the hill country of*

Ephraim joined the chase when they saw the Philistines running away. ²³ So the LORD saved Israel that day, and the battle continued to rage even beyond Beth-aven.

Practical Thoughts:

Meet new people

Look around you at church and introduce yourself to people you do not know

Look for opportunities to be in relationship with someone that you may be able to mentor or influence

Meet with them regularly

Pray together

Pray for each other during the week

Accountability

Don't talk to anyone you know for the first three minutes after a service.

Look for people to sit with that appear to be alone.

Talk to the same person more than once.

There were two soldiers who were very close to each other. During an encounter, a bullet had hit one of them. His friend was in a fox hole. He saw everything. He wanted to rescue his friend but his commander stopped him. "It's too late! Your friend is already dead." But he still ran. Bullets rained upon him. He carried his friend on his back and ran back towards the fox hole. But his friend is already dead. To make matters worse, he is also bleeding from bullet wounds. The commander was so angry. "Look what you've done! What a waste!" The soldier answered, "No, sir. When I got there, he was still alive. Before he died he whispered, 'I knew you're coming for me. I knew you're not leaving me behind.'" That's a truly dependable friend.