

Study Guide for the Central Church of Christ 1-21-18

January 21 we continue a topical series on relationships. Today's message focuses on having a healthy relationship with others. Discussion questions are:

1. What kind of relationships are a source of joy for people?
2. What kind of relationships are a source of pain for people?
3. How did you do on the 4 question inventory this morning:
 - a. Do you have at least one person nearby you could call in times of personal distress?
 - b. Do you have several people you could visit with little advance warning – and without apology?
 - c. Do you have several people with whom you can share recreational activities?
 - d. Do you have people who will lend you money if you need it, or those who will care for you in practical ways if the need arises?
4. How did you do on the second set of 4 questions this morning:
 - a. How do you respond when a relationship hits a bump in the road?
 - b. What relationships used to be a significant part of your life but are no longer close?
 - c. Is there anyone with whom you want to mend fences?
 - d. Who might find you to be a difficult person?
5. Grade yourself A – F on rejoicing with those who rejoice and mourning with those who mourn.
 - a. How do you plan to improve your score?
6. Why would it be appropriate in selecting elders to ask oneself, “Who has rejoiced with me or mourned with me?”
7. What is the difference in a good listener and an intimate listener?
8. Agree/disagree: *The parable Jesus told in Luke 7:32 is about God wanting us to rejoice with Him and mourn with Him.*
 - a. If you agree, how do you rejoice with God and mourn with God?
9. Did the “technology addict” test this morning cause you to think you might need to re-think how you use technology?
 - a. Have you ever felt like someone's misuse of technology was affecting your relationship with them?
10. Is it realistic to have a goal of people regarding you as the person who loves them?

On Having a Loving Relationship with Each Other

If you were to ask most people, “What's the greatest source of joy in your life?” the most common answer would probably be something about relationships. Maybe they would tell you about a special family moment or about falling in love or the joy of holding a child for the first time or a special friend.

Oddly enough if you were to ask, “What’s the greatest source of pain in your life?” you would likely hear again about relationships. Perhaps you would hear about a dysfunctional parent who is cold or abusive. You might hear about the sting of divorce. Or you might hear about a child who refuses to be loved and just sort of stiff-arms their parents.

People have always hungered for loving relationships. It’s part of the human condition. When Jesus came, he brought with him a profound understanding of loving relationships, a profound ability to give love that was quite unique, a kind of intimate relationship with people that the world hadn’t known before, and it launched a movement.

Let’s take a quick inventory and see if we are modeling the kind of love relationship Jesus launched:

1. Do you have at least one person nearby you could call in times of personal distress?
2. Do you have several people you could visit with little advance warning – and without apology?
3. Do you have several people with whom you can share recreational activities?
4. Do you have people who will lend you money if you need it, or those who will care for you in practical ways if the need arises?

If your answers are mostly negative you are missing out on the essence of this new way of living Jesus modeled. Maybe you need to listen closely this morning to see if there is some action you could take to plug into the movement Jesus launched.

Let me throw out 4 more questions to help you understand if you need to work on your relationships:

1. How do you respond when a relationship hits a bump in the road?
2. What relationships used to be a significant part of your life but are no longer close?
3. Is there anyone with whom you want to mend fences?
4. Who might find you to be a difficult person?

The key to having meaningful relationships with other people is found in a single command given by Paul. If you follow this principle, you will never lack for intimate friendships. If you fail to follow it, you will never experience intimate relationships. Here is the principle: *Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.* – *Romans 12:15*

Rejoicing generally involves small triumphs. Your boss was happy with a project you did at work. Somebody complimented you on how you looked. Somebody noticed you smiling more than usual. Mourning can also involve small matters. It’s running late for work because traffic was bad. It’s having an argument at home before you left. It’s one of your children doing poorly at school. Or it’s deleting a file you needed.

Even before we are able to tell someone we are rejoicing or mourning we seek out someone with whom we can share the experience. Watch a mom with her baby. When the baby starts to cry, the mom will instinctively stick out her lower lip and make sad, comforting little noises. A similar thing happens when a baby smiles. The parent smiles back. Have you ever seen an adult

respond to a smiling infant with, “What’s so funny kid? Are you making fun of my hair? That’s what I dislike about your generation, you don’t have any respect for older people.”

That Romans 12 passage is actually just one of many places where the Bible commands us to rejoice. Why command it? Because when we are joyful people, we end up giving a gift of joy to everyone we meet and you were created by God to be a giver of joy.

The flip side of the Romans 12 command is to mourn with those who mourn. Notice the command is not, “Give advice to those who mourn.” The command does not say, “Remind those who mourn that the resurrection will heal their sadness.” Nor does it say, “Explain to those who mourn that God always has a good reason for whatever happens so they should just trust Him.” The command does not say, “Fix those who mourn.”

But the Bible does say, “*bear one another’s burdens.*” Sorrow is one of those burdens. When we mourn with others, we share the burden of their sorrow. Nothing has changed. Nothing has been fixed. No problem has been solved – except this: They are no longer alone in their mourning. And that changes everything.

When you are called on occasionally to nominate a prospective elder the first question to ask is, “Who is there who has rejoiced with me or mourned with me? Who would I expect to be at my front door to share my joy or my sorrow without being assigned the task? Who is there who knows me that well and cares that much?” A healthy church is one where everybody has that kind of relationship with at least one elder.

Suppose you want to improve your relationships with someone in the church by rejoicing with those who rejoice and mourning with those who mourn. Where do you start? What skill do you develop? The key to understanding who in the course of your day is rejoicing and who is mourning is being an intimate listener. There is a big difference between being a good listener and being an intimate listener. A good listener understands facts. An intimate listener understands feelings. A good listener can repeat what you said. An intimate listener can sense what you feel. Let me give you a good example of being an intimate listener. When I notified the elders it was time to get serious about retirement plans the first thing they asked me was, “Are you O.K.? We will discuss the retirement plan with you but first we want to know if you are O.K.?” As it happens I am O.K. but I can’t begin to tell you how it made me feel for them to be first and foremost concerned about me before they addressed the retirement plan.

Did you know that God rejoices and God mourns? Did you know He invites us to rejoice with Him and mourn with Him? Did you know that sometimes we do that and sometimes we don’t? Jesus told a story about our response to God’s invitation. He said we are often “...like children playing a game in the public square. They complain to their friends, ‘We played wedding songs, and you didn’t dance, so we played funeral songs, and you didn’t weep.’” – Luke 7:32

Rejoicing with God doesn’t mean trying to make ourselves happy over a Bible verse or a church service. It’s about taking something we’re naturally happy about, remembering that “*whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God,*” and thanking him for that gift.

It could be something as simple as viewing a sunset, the ocean, a mountain, or a tree. It could be the taste of English muffins on a Sunday morning. It could be your favorite song, your favorite movie, a well-executed jump shot, or the sound of a bird singing. It could be congratulations from someone at work, a triumph for your child at school, or just the fact that your mind and body are working pretty well right now.

Can I just get real practical about this business of building healthy spiritual relationships? When it comes to relationships, technology is not your friend. Have you heard of “tech addiction?” Let me help you understand tech addiction and you can decide for yourself if you have it. Answer these 6 questions to find out technology is affecting your relationships adversely:

1. Do you sleep with your cell phone on your nightstand or in your bed?
2. Do your friends or family complain about your attending to a screen too much?
3. Do you check your phone first thing in the morning and last thing at night?
4. Do you feel bummed when you forget to bring your cell phone into the bathroom?
5. Have you practiced the art of secretly texting while maintaining eye contact?
6. Do you check your cell phone at business meetings, intimate dinners, or during sermons?

If you answered “yes” to most of those questions you may have a tech addiction and chances are it is affecting your relationships with people much more than you know. Healthy relationships involve shared experience and they also require presence. And presence doesn’t mean simply having my body in the same room with yours. It requires sustained, focused attention. It demands eye contact. It demands that we look up from our screens and put down our devices.

Brandie Johnson is the mother of young twin boys. A couple of years ago she decided to conduct a little experiment: She took an hour one morning to unplug from her smart phone and her internet connection and simply watch her boys play. She also decided to keep score: If the boys ever looked over to see if she was watching them, she’d make a mark on a piece of paper. She ended up with 28 marks. Here’s her report:

As I sat quietly in the corner of the room I tallied how many times they looked at me for various reasons: to see if I saw their cool tricks, to seek approval or disapproval for what they were doing, and to watch my reactions. I couldn’t help but wonder if I was on some sort of technology what message would I have been sending? 28 times my angels would have wondered if the World Wide Web was more important than them. 28 times my boys would have not received the attention most adults are searching for. 28 times my loves would have questioned if they were alone emotionally. 28 times my kids would have been reassured that who you are online is what really matters. In a world where we are accepted as who people perceive us to be and not who we really are, in a world where validation comes from how many followers or likes we have, in a world where quality time with loved ones is being replaced by isolation and text messages from the other room, I beg you to be different. Please put down your technology and spend some time with your family and loved ones. The next generation of children is counting on us to teach them how to be adults. Don’t be too busy on social media. You never know who is watching and what message you are sending.

Let me wrap this up this morning by asking you one question – how do people in this church who know you think you feel about them? After my mother died I asked each of my 3 siblings if they felt like they were mother’s favorite child. They each said, “Yes.” That fascinated me because there is absolutely no doubt who my mother’s favorite child was - me! How in the world did my mom make each of her 4 children feel they were the favorite? Have you ever thought about Jesus doing that with people in his circle of friends? In his gospel John gives himself a nickname, “the disciple who Jesus loved.” It’s sort of interesting that none of the other gospel writers acknowledge such a nickname for John. Maybe that’s because they all saw themselves as “the one Jesus loved.” N.T. Wright says John was most likely the youngest of the disciples based on the fact that he lived way longer than any of them. In that day, to be young was to lack status. In that day, age carried status with it. Part of what John would’ve understood is if he is the youngest disciple, he is the least strategic disciple. He is the least mature disciple. He is the least valued. To that he responded, “But here’s my identity. I’m the one Jesus loved. I don’t know why. I can’t explain it. I sure didn’t earn it. But I am the one Jesus loved.” I hope that is how you see Jesus feeling about you.

If I could set one spiritual goal for myself and for you also it would be to so live that people feel about you the way John perceived Jesus feeling about him.

Look, **life is just about love!** What makes a church great is not that it has really impressive programs, buildings, or numbers. It’s just love. It’s just love! What makes a life great, oddly enough, is not how beautiful, wealthy, or successfully it’s lived. It’s just love. Love is not sentiment. It’s not pleasing somebody. It is to will their good as God intends their good. John says, “Dear children let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.” – I John 3:18

Prayer: *God, thank you for the love that is in this church. Help it to increase even more. Help us grow not only in our ability to love but in our ability to let others know we love them. May the love that exists in this church this morning heal wounds and melt hearts. Thank you for the cross where you do reconstructive surgery on our souls.*