

XII. L.E.A.D. in Biblical Perspective
Lifestyle of Evangelism and Discipleship
“Building Bridges—#5: Relational Evangelism”

James 2:23; Proverbs 17:17

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We will be looking at II Chronicles 20 in this study on relational evangelism. This study is about how we can build bridges in the lives of people to bring them to the Bridge to Life that they can come to Christ. So we will look at how to build the bridge of relational evangelism.

We are learning in this series how to build bridges in people's lives as we seek to embrace the theme for this year of lifestyle of evangelism and discipleship. A lifestyle doesn't evangelize. It's the Gospel shared that evangelizes but a lifestyle can open a door to evangelism and can open a door with a call to discipleship. A man visiting recently said that one of their problems in Africa is that they have a lot of professing converts and few followers/disciples of Christ. Part of the reason for that is we evangelize calling upon people to profess Christ as Savior and then later on we'll get around to them about this matter of discipleship. That's not what Jesus did. Jesus constantly put the two together – come, follow Me. To come to Him as Savior was to follow Him as Lord and it was a commitment to do that.

So we have been trying to build some elements of a lifestyle of evangelism. So the first element was the first bridge of conversational evangelism which showed us how to have a conversation to bring people to the Gospel message – the Gospel benefits of salvation and the Gospel call of discipleship. The second bridge used in the Bible is event evangelism where events are put together to bring people to, in order for Jesus to talk with them about the Gospel. Then we looked at a third bridge which was hospitality evangelism. This does not necessarily mean you have to fix someone a meal. The word hospitality is the open door for the open home that displays an open heart. This may mean just having dessert and not a meal. The fourth bridge we looked at was proclamation evangelism which is evangelism we can proclaim.

An event coming up where the bridge of event evangelism can be utilized is when we have this comedian Dennis Swanburg who will come on a Sunday night and we will make use of a movie from our dear friends, the Urban brothers, call I Can Only Imagine. When you are having conversations with people about Christ you can bring them to such events and then you can open up your homes to follow up with them about what they have heard. Then you can bring them to proclamation events of evangelism as well.

Having said that I believe this bridge of relational evangelism is an important bridge. The largest attended class in the history of Yale University was a class on happiness as the antidote to loneliness. In fact, they had to come out and say they were not going to offer it anymore because all the other teachers got mad. Over a fourth of the student body ended up taking this class which happened this last year. Yet aren't we connected all over the place?

There was a book that came out a number of years ago called Megatrends and in this book the author anticipated the day of the personal computer and the various technological devices that would come with it. In it he coined a phrase – high tech will mean low touch. Look at your list of friends on FaceBook. I have people on my list of friends and I don't even know who they are. I accept them because I basically use that social media to get a message to them about Jesus every once in a while so if the Reformers could use the Guttenberg press then I can certainly make use of technology of today, hopefully thoughtfully and rightfully so.

The fact is that there is a facade of relationships through technology that aren't really relationships and contribute to loneliness because they don't deliver what we think we need them to deliver and what we actually want them to deliver. Do you think it's any accident that the people who invented FaceBook called that category friends? They know you long for it. What is there is not friendship. It can lead to friendship and communication but it's not friendship. That is not a real relationship. It is contacts but the fact they labeled it as 'friend' they knew what to call it for you to want to be a part of it. The more it doesn't deliver the more we're desperately looking for that friendship and want that friendship. Not only does the technology promise something that it can't deliver but it actually does deliver something that is antithetical to friendship and that is it actually consumes our time where we don't even have time for friendship.

I almost could see this headline for me recently; "Pastor at Briarwood in fist fight at the Longhorn Restaurant." I walked in to this place, was early for lunch and there were about 15 to 20 people sitting there, spread out among five tables with about 3 to 5 people at each table. Not one person was talking or looking at anyone at their table. Everybody was looking at their iPhone. I walked into the dining area and said 'Hey are ya'll have a great time in fellowship with each other?' I think about 17 laughed and 3 looked at me probably thinking due to their stare 'What business of this is yours and who do you think you are asking that?' I have gotten that look before and 2 of those 3 people were about twice my size so I was a little concerned for a moment. This technology actually consumes us even when we're sitting at a dinner table.

Here is a good rule at the dinner table. No phones or other electronic devices at the dinner table. This way it actually forces us to have to talk with each other. The technology is actually isolating us. Now it does give us a communication instrument but it doesn't give us a relational instrument. So in looking at this relational bridge I actually think people want is desperately and few have it and fewer have friendships today than ever before. That's why you can pretty much put anything you want on the program but if you call the show 'Friends' everybody will line up to watch it. Or have a sitcom with the opening theme song that says 'Everybody wants to go where everybody knows your name' and people will watch it. There is this great hunger for friendship.

That friendship is an opportunity but there are some careful things I have to say about it before we put it into practice. Let's look at II Chronicles 20:5-7 which says [5] *And Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD, before the new court, [6] and said, "O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you. [7] Did you not, our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend?*

It's interesting to note that this is not a text on friendship. It's interesting as it talks about what God has done for His covenant people, these people are descendant from one who had a relationship with God that God characterizes and this writer characterizes as a friend. Abraham was a friend of God. Now let's look at Isaiah 41. In this passage we will see a similar declaration and theme that is going on here. Isaiah 41:8 says [8] *But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend.*

Now let's look at James 2. This is a marvelous text that says were saved by faith alone but faith is never alone for it's always evidenced by works and Abraham becomes an example of someone who is saved by faith alone but the saving is never alone and it has the evidences of the life of obedience imperfect as it may be. Yet notice what it says about Abraham who believed in

the Lord. James 2:23 says [23] *and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God.* So why is this here and why does it keep showing up with Abraham?

Abraham is the very product of God's sovereign grace. God in His sovereign grace reaches in to the land of the Chaldeans and places His sovereign electing hand upon Abraham and brings him to Himself and Abraham believed the Lord by the power of God's sovereign grace. Then to have a saving relationship with God through Christ you are now a friend of God. That is a status you enjoy and it's not the only status you enjoy for there are multiple status we have with the Lord. We are adopted, born again, heirs, ambassadors, etc. There are all kinds of titles, declarations and descriptions of our saving relationship throughout Scripture for multiple reasons but one of them that clearly stands is that the believer is a friend of God.

Why would this be something to emphasize? It's because until you're converted you're an enemy and under the wrath of God. But the same God who has you righteously under His wrath sovereignly places that wrath upon His Son in order to save you. When He saves you, you are no longer His enemy but you are now His friend. You are His friend by status and you increasingly become His friend in intimacy and in your walk with Him. It is just like friendships you have. Someone becomes your friend and you know your friends and as you walk through life together you become closer and closer. So as we are saved we are now friends of God and to God and our friendship and intimacy increases as we grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, the One who has saved us.

Now when someone becomes my friend that doesn't save them but I do want all my friends to be saved and I know that through my friendship with them I can give them a taste of what it means to be a friend to God. I can also give them the information of how to be a friend to God. So what about our friendship with others? Let's look at Proverbs 17. So God's friendship to us saves us but our friendship to them doesn't save them but it can be an instrument for them to see, hear and feel the Savior. There are so many verses in the book of Proverbs and other passages I could use here but for the sake of time I'm only going to use this text and then I will draw out five elements of relational friendship as a bridge.

Remember that the book of Proverbs is a Divinely inspired, ordained, revealed collection, under the authorship of Solomon, of wisdom. This is common sense wisdom about life from wisdom from above. Do not treat this as a book of promises. Here is a statement of wisdom that is given to us about friendship. Proverbs 17:17 says [17] *A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.* You can set aside the second part of that verse because I'm not going to talk about the brother relationships because in a spiritual sense I don't have a brother relationship with an unbeliever.

I can have a friend relationship though and what does that friend relationship look like? This relationship embraces the phrase 'a friend loves at all times.' The next part tells you that even in time of adversity which a brother shines in but a friend doesn't back off from. So here are these five statements about friendship.

One, friendship is not evangelism. One of my problems when I hear people say 'friendship evangelism' is that we think friendship is evangelism and that when people become my friends they have become evangelized. No, nobody is going to heaven because they are your friend. If they are God's friend then that means they are on their way to heaven. Relational evangelism can be an effective bridge for evangelism.

Immediately after I was converted there were two drives in me. One drive was to go tell my friends what had just happened to me and I could walk right into their life because we were

friends. I will tell you that I lost some friends after I was converted. Some I lost because they didn't want to hang around with me anymore because I wasn't doing what they were doing anymore. Some weren't my friends anymore because when I told them of my love for Jesus I wasn't really smart about it and I think I ran some of them off by the way I did it. Some I still maintained a friendship with and I continued to pray that God would help me to reach them with the Gospel. I had a second prayer and that was that the people who had been my friends (10 of them), I had led them into the degradations of sin when I was apart from the Lord. When I was converted there was no internet or social media to search their name on so I just began to pray that God would bring them into my life and He brought them all into my life. The last one came into my life when I had prostate cancer and they heard and called me. I then had the opportunity to share the Gospel with them. My friendship can be an effective tool for evangelism but being my friend won't save them.

Secondly, relational friendship is not for evangelism but for people whom we will love to evangelize. You don't go make friends in order to evangelize them for I think that's a misuse of friendship. I believe you are going to become a friend to people because you are going to love them. What do you want to do with people you love? You want to evangelize them. You ask God to give you a friendship love for them and then the people you love you evangelize. Please hear me on this. You are going to make friends with people because they are made in the image of God and when you make a friend and give them the friendship love in the relationship then you love them enough to evangelize them.

Thirdly, relational friendship can lead to fellowship but only with some believers. I make a distinction between friendship and fellowship. The Bible says what fellowship does light have with darkness. Friendship is characterized by a handshake/fist bump, elbow tap or whatever country you are from that denotes a friendship greeting but it's an extension of yourself. I think fellowship is more than that. It is a full open-armed embrace. In fellowship I am vulnerable in a reciprocal relationship. In friendship I am loving someone but I will not be vulnerable until the depths of that relationship in Christ can be established. In other words, my intimate fellowship is reserved for believers and by the way, not all believers. There are varying levels of fellowship as there are varying levels of friendship. With a believer I will have some level of fellowship but not all the same but friendship does not call for my unguarded fellowship with someone but friendship should be a declaration of a relationship.

Fourthly, relational friendship is helpful in evangelism but not necessary. If I'm on a plane and they come over the intercom and say 'we're going down and we are going to hit the ground in about a minute and a half' then it will be tough to develop a friendship but they don't have to be my friend to hear the Gospel. Friendship is a bridge but it's not necessary. Having said that, why don't we just be friendly all the time anyway? We don't have to wall up our life like everybody else or give off those body signals where it tells people not to invade your space. I think it would be really amazing if Christians would actually show to people the joy of the Lord and it would show up on our faces. There are those who may have the joy of the Lord in their heart but they have not communicated it in their face in quite some time.

I'm going to save you a lot of money. You don't need botox just quit frowning and start smiling. Let what is in your heart fill your soul and come through on your countenance. I think one of the reasons we don't let it come through is we're afraid of rejection. Even when someone doesn't look friendly you are accepted in the beloved. If they don't join in and accept that's okay because Jesus already has. If you have your security in Christ then you're free to be friendly with other people. So relational evangelism friendship is helpful in evangelism and

being friendly is a call in our life but you don't have to be someone's best friend to lead them to Christ.

Finally, relationship friendship is marked by some specific characteristics that I want to draw from this text. The first one is that a friend loves. We are talking about loving somebody because they are made in the image of God. Again, this is not striking up a friendship to evangelize but it's about just being a friend to them and then the people that I love I share the Gospel with. We start by loving them. I want to remind you that while love evokes emotion, in the Bible love is described by action. God so loved the world that He gave His only Son (John 3:16). Romans 5:8 says *[8] but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*. Certainly love has much emotion attached to it but love is primarily an action whether it's phileo love (the love of family), eros love (the love of intimacy in a marriage), agape love (sacrificial love) or storge (parent to child love) and that's why Paul says 'I have heard of your labor of love, your work of love.' So love is an action that evoke emotion in our relationship with someone.

Secondly, it is a love that is dependable. A friend loves at all times. It is a love that is there in good times and in bad times but we are there. Friendship calls for dependability.

Thirdly, a friend loves at all times and what is assumed is a friend loves because they are accessible. You can get to them. Accessibility is crucial.

Fourthly, a friend is transparent. Here is a good time, here is bad time and I'm not going to act like something is not true.

Fifthly, is that friendship has all kinds of levels to it. There are some friends you have deeper and deeper levels of intimacy with. So in various situations it is taken to various levels.

I want to close by looking at Proverbs 18:24 which says *[24] A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother*. I hope you catch something here. Earlier I read a text that says that says 'a friend loves at all times but at brother is there in adversity.'

I have a dear friend in Scotland named William McKenzie and he has three brothers. On the father's death bed the father said to them 'I want you to join together informally and legally in a corporation and make your brotherhood relationship and business. One was a chemist, one a publisher, one a farmer and one an accountant.' "Dad, how can we be together in business, we don't do the same thing." The father said "There are going to be times in your life where one of you is going to be in great need and I want the other three to be there, whether it's business or personal or whatever. You are brothers, now go be brothers in business."

I sat with these four men and they shared with me the stories of how that worked out in their life. There is something special about family. It is something gloriously wonderful that even goes beyond friendship even as wonderful as friendship can be. Some friendships will rival it but even in the midst of adversity the friend you hope will be there and they ought to be there but the brother should be there.

Now when you get to Proverbs 18 praise the Lord that there is a Friend who is even more dependable than a brother in the day of your adversity. Jesus, what a Friend for sinners, Lover of my soul! Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word as we keep trying to understand how in our lifestyle we can rightly, in holiness, by grace, for Your glory, establish relationships with people whereby we can tell them of the relationship for all of time and

eternity, in Jesus Christ our Lord. So Father, we give You praise and thanksgiving as brothers and friends to reach others as friends to tell them of our Friend who is even greater than a brother, Jesus the Friend of sinners, for I pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.