



Relationships

A MESS WORTH MAKING



Relationships and the Nature of God¹

Relationships can be messy. Having to deal with flawed people in a broken world can make one wonder if some relationships are even worth it. Have you felt this way? Have you ever avoided a neighbor or a co-worker? Ever choose to just swallow how you really feel because the work involved, if you really opened up, doesn't seem worth it?

The difficulty of relationships can lead to families sharing the same space without sharing meaningful contact, church meetings becoming a formality with no attempt to share in the lives of others, and neighbors living side by side without knowing anything significant about one another. Is this a valid way to live? Is it OK to keep to ourselves so that we don't get hurt or don't hurt someone else? What's wrong with playing it safe?

Oddly enough, we can live with a tension between self-protective isolation and the desire for meaningful relationships. We can, on one hand, avoid the discomfort often created by relationships but, at the same time, know that we are less than human when we are alone. Every relational decision we make tends to move toward either isolation or immersion, and sometimes we may find ourselves at an extreme end of this continuum; we are tempted to make relationships either less or more than they were intended to be.

“I want to be safe”
(isolation)

“I need you in order to live”
(immersion)

Relational Profiles

Because we tend toward one of these characteristics—immersion or isolation—our relationships tend to fit one of three profiles:

- The Frustrated Relationship

In this relationship, one person moves toward isolation and the other moves toward immersion. One dreams of being safe; the other dreams of being close and intimate.

How would the perfect vacation look to each of these two types of people?

The one who seeks isolation may want to just sit and read, relax; while the one who seeks immersion may want lots of activities to do together.

¹ The following from *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making* by Tim Lane and Paul Tripp, available for \$10.00 in the CBC Resource Center.

How might it feel to live in this type of relationship?

The isolationist can feel smothered while the immersionist feels rejected. Because both feel like their expectations are unmet, they both feel frustrated and disappointed, which may eventually lead to anger between them.

- The Enmeshed Relationship

Here both people move toward immersion. Both parties are relationally dependent on the other.

How would the perfect vacation look to each of these two types of people?

They might spend every waking moment together and ignore other relationships.

How might it feel to live in this type of relationship?

Because they are so dependent on each other, they can be easily hurt when the other does not meet their expectation, which can lead them to be highly critical of the other. They can feel discouraged because, no matter how hard they try, they can never measure up to the other person's expectations. This kind of relationship is exhausting because much energy is spent dealing with minor offenses.

- The Isolated Relationship

In this relationship both persons move toward isolation. Both make relational decisions based on maintaining safety.

How would the perfect vacation look to each of these two types of people?

They might both spend time alone, each reading a different book.

How might it feel to live in this type of relationship?

Because they desire safety but also connection—because we are all designed to desire connection—they feel empty and disappointed.

When things go wrong in relationships, the problem is often rooted in the heart and in the expectations we bring to the relationships, whether it is our expectation for safety or for dependency. This is why we need to seek God's expectations for our relationships: What purpose does God intend relationships to serve in our lives? As persons created in the image of God, what should our relationships look like? Without a biblical model to explain the place relationships should have in our lives, we will likely experience imbalance, confusion, conflicting desires, and general frustration.

Our Relational God

Since we are made in the image of God, we cannot talk about the nature of human relationships without first thinking about the nature of God.

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

“Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.” (John 17:20-26)

For whom and for what is Jesus praying in this part of his prayer?

Jesus is praying for all those who will believe in him, and he prays for their unity—that they would be one. It is relevant that as Jesus looks back on his public ministry and all it was meant to accomplish, and looks forward to the cross and all it was ordained to produce, his focus is riveted on community! Of all the things Christ could pray for at this moment, he prays for the unity of his people.

What is the model for community Jesus sees for his people?

Jesus wants us to have the same community with God and with others that he has with the Father and Spirit. We can see this community also in Genesis 1:26, where God speaks in the plural, “Let us make man ...” God knows how to help us with our struggles with community because he is a community. We tend to think of God as an individual; but, while God is one, the Bible also says he exists in three persons: the trinity. God himself is a model of loving, cooperative, unified community where diversity is an asset and not a liability.

If God himself is a community, what does it mean to be human, made in God’s likeness?

It means we were created to be in community; we were created as social beings. In Genesis 2:18 as God looks at his creation before the fall, he says, “It is not good for man to be alone.” Community with one another is not only a duty; it is an aspect of our humanity.

In Christ's prayer, what is one of the purposes for human community?

Human community is to be a means of reflecting God's glory to the world, that the world may believe in God the Father and God the Son. Furthermore, God has a purpose for our relationships; therefore, our relationships must be shaped by what God intends and not by what we want.

Why do we need Christ to be praying for us?

Because we are flawed; we are sinners; we can't manufacture true community on our own. Sin's self-centeredness cuts us off from God and others.

Christ not only prays for our unity with one another but that we would also have community with whom?

Jesus prays that we would have community with God. We are invited to be a part of this divine community! And it is out of this community that we can experience community with one another. In fact, we can't move toward community with one another until we have been drawn into community with God.

Is there anything else about this prayer and its background that shows God's deep commitment to creating true community?

(1) *"I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one." In spite of the ongoing presence of sin, in God the Holy Spirit we have been given us a way to be empowered to have meaningful relationships. The Spirit who allowed Christ to minister in a fallen world is the same Spirit who dwells within us to allow us to minister in a fallen world.*

(2) *Christ is facing death on a cross so that our relationship to God can be restored and so that our relationships with others can be glorifying to him.*

Think about the stages of a person's life beginning from birth. What can you identify that shows we were designed to be in community with others?

We are dependent upon someone from the moment we are born; we seek out human relationships; as teens we seek acceptance of our peers; as young adults we begin to desire deeper, more committed relationships; we have a web of communities we function in—church, neighborhood, schools, family, work—our fondest memories and deepest hurts often involve relationships; we grieve at the loss of a loved one, even when we know he or she is with the Lord.

God designed us to be relational—it is our very nature, and it is one way in which we reflect the image of God. And only when we live in community do we fully reflect the likeness of God. Relationships are not optional! Because of sin, relationships can be messy, but they are not optional. Problems in relationships are often rooted in our selfish desires—when we seek to fulfill our own perceived wants and needs instead of seeking to please God. If there are problems in your relationships, the solution starts with God; the circle of human community is only healthy when it exists within the larger circle of community with God.