



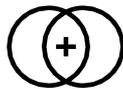
THE
MENTORING
PROJECT

RELATIONSHIPS:
HOW TO HAVE A
RELATIONSHIP
WITH GOD
AND OTHERS



JONATHAN PARNELL

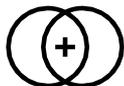
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INTRODUCTION: RELATIONSHIPS

Life is relationships, and relationships are hard. It pays well to learn this lesson sooner than later.

The devaluing of relationships is something of a cultural phenomenon among America's largest generation, and though I can't remember when I first heard this, it's now become something I see all the time: Many 20-somethings apply a scarcity mindset to work. For years in high school and college, relationships have been in excess. It's not hard for most kids to find friends. What appears rare, however, for the young man or woman preparing to step into the post-school world, is employment. The scarcity mindset says there are not enough jobs to go around and so securing one becomes top priority. The sad irony is that many young people leave established, meaningful relationships in pursuit of a job only to discover years later that it's the jobs that abound — meaningful relationships are scarce.

It's no wonder, then, that our society suffers from a loneliness epidemic. It's been well-documented that even with our digital progress that attempts to make us more "connected" than ever, human beings in the Western world have never been more lonely. We have learned to deprioritize the central factor to a life well-lived. The urgency to change our thinking could not be greater. Life is relationships.

Deep down, most people know this. Relationships are woven into the fabric of life. The stories we love — our favorite books and movies and music — are all about relationships. Whether it's relationships formed, recovered, or broken (ever heard a country song?), we are fascinated not by individuals, but by individuals-in-relation. We see this even in our society's infatuation with celebrities. While it might appear that we esteem celebrities for their talents and accomplishments, beneath that

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esteem is a curiosity to see them in their relationships. We get to know a person through the company they keep, which is the point of reality TV specials on the lives of celebrities, not to mention TMZ or any tabloid lining the walls of the grocery store checkout line. Are those headlines ever about someone's skills? They are about individuals-in-relation, and the wilder the drama, the harder it is to look away. We know that a person's true wealth (or poverty) is in their connection to the people around them.

Isn't that what matters most on our deathbeds? We want to be survived by others who care enough to kindly write our obituaries. In the same way that hearses don't pull U-Haul trailers, it's become an equally morbid (but true) trope to say that nobody in their final moments wished they had spent more time at the office. If we're lucky enough in our final moments on earth, I imagine our thoughts will be filled with faces, with names, with those closest to us that we'd only wish we had more time here to love. It seems nearly impossible to overstate the importance of relationships.

Isn't this the point of the classic *It's a Wonderful Life*? In the final scene, in a house full of neighbors, with everyone pitching in to help George, his brother Harry arrives to the surprise of the crowd. Everyone gets hushed and Harry lifts his glass to say, "A toast to my big brother George, the richest man in town!" Cheers erupt, and George picks up a copy of Tom Sawyer, left by Clarence, the angel. The shot zooms in for us to read the inscription Clarence wrote to George: Remember no man is a failure who has friends! Yes, the movie's angelology is off, but its message about friendship is spot-on and moving. Life is relationships.

But at the same time, let's not romanticize relationships, because they can be hard. The worst pain in our stories, and much of our ongoing complexities, is relational. We wind up hurting others and being hurt, burning trust and casting suspicion. Relationships are often our greatest blessings and, when they're broken, our nagging curse. At the very least, relationships are hard.

The aim of this field guide is to offer a truer vision of relationships in general, and to help us get a handle on how to navigate them.

1

THREE CATEGORIES OF RELATIONSHIPS

When you think of relationships, my guess is that you immediately think of *horizontal* relationships with other people. That is where so much of our blessings and brokenness get played out. But horizontal relationships are actually a third category of relationships shaped by two preceding categories. We can call these *vertical* and *internal*. Our relationship with others is influenced by, first, our relationship with God (vertical), and second, our relationship to ourselves (internal). These two relationships are the real beginning. Oftentimes the woes we contribute to our horizontal relationships stem from distortions in how we relate to God and ourselves. So before we get into the details of our horizontal relationships, we need to start there.

Vertical — Our Relationship to God

The fundamental fact in our relationship to God is that we are made by *him* and for *him*. In truth, this is also the case for everything in existence. Everything exists because of God and, ultimately, for his purposes. In this light, all of creation may be considered relational, connected to God the creator, who is himself relational in his existence as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And if all creation is relational, that is certainly true for every human, which means that every human has a relationship with God. It's what it means to be human. We are God's creatures. This is foundational to who we are, and it's our most important relationship — the basis of how to have a relationship with God in the first place.

But immediately we are confronted with the inescapable reality that every human's relationship with God has been broken because of our sin. Plagued by the fall of our original parents, and following in their

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rebellion with our own particular sins, we have despised our creatureliness and wanted to be our own deity. The real question now about our relationship to God is whether it remains broken or has been restored. Does our sin against God still separate us from him, or have we been reconciled to him?

The brokenness continues, of course, if we ignore it. This is certainly the standard operating procedure for many. It seems that the easiest way to manage our broken relationship with God is by pretending God doesn't exist. The Bible tells us that atheism is foolishness (see Ps. 14:1), but we might also add that atheism is a coping mechanism. "Exclusive humanism," as it's been called, is humanity's move to make transcendence something we create, refusing to acknowledge any reality outside ourselves. This refusal to acknowledge God requires even scrubbing away every idea of God, or at least the ideas that might infringe upon our autonomous sovereignty. This is atheism at the functional level. It's an attempt to put the pain of our vertical relational brokenness out of sight and thus out of mind, hidden beneath the floor of our everyday lives. But like with the beating heart of Edgar Allen Poe's dark story, the sound of our crime gets louder and louder, as our attempts to drown it out become more intense and normalized. This kind of willed ignorance is one way the brokenness remains.

Another way the brokenness in our relationship with God remains is when we take it upon ourselves to be the solution. This is when we recognize the brokenness but think it's up to us to solve the problem. We assume that the only way the chasm between God and us will be bridged is if we, the sinful offenders, move toward him, hoping to impress him by our religiosity and good works. We figure that maybe that will earn his favor and put things right.

John Bunyan, the seventeenth-century writer and pastor, learned how futile this is. When he first came under the conviction of his sin, biographer Faith Cook recounts that he fell under "the spell of high church ritual."¹ In his autobiography, he says he was overcome with a spirit of superstition, busied by all the things he must do to improve himself. And he had a decent run for a while, he admits, even scrupulously keeping the Ten Commandments and winning the respect

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of his neighbors, until he realized it didn't stick — kind of like the duct tape I keep reapplying on one part of my dishwasher. Bunyan, for all his efforts and pride in his “godliness,” could not appease his own conscience. He felt there was never enough he could do for God, and within a matter of time Bunyan found himself in more despair than ever. There is a kind of despair that every sinner feels because of their broken relationship with God, but there is another kind of despair for sinners on the other side of recognizing that brokenness *and* trying to fix it themselves. The original brokenness is exacerbated by our failure to solve it, and so the brokenness remains, even deepens, for the poor legalist as much as for the poor atheist. That was Bunyan's story. Mine too.

So how is our relationship to God restored?

God takes it upon himself to close the chasm between us — and this divine initiative ultimately overflows horizontally in loving your neighbor and pursuing godly relationships formed by grace rather than self-effort.

Imagine God as being way up high, above the heavens, and we're way down here, on the earth. There's a distance between us, a physical and moral chasm that represents everything that is wrong with us and the world. That distance is not only the consequence of our own mess, but it's the standing reminder that such a gap is necessary. We don't deserve him. Humans can try their hardest to bridge that gap, to become worthy, but it never works. We call this attempt “religiosity.” We work ourselves to death trying to climb a metaphorical ladder back to God, but we cannot get there. So God himself came here. We can't better ourselves enough to get to God, so God humbled himself enough to come to us. This is what makes the good news of Jesus Christ so good.

God the Father sent his Son into this world to become human like us, to be truly human for us, and to die in our place, the righteous for the unrighteous. He did it to bring us back to God (see 1 Pet. 3:18). Jesus came to save us from our sins, embodying the grace of God to us, taking upon himself the very cause of the chasm. He went straight for the root of our broken relationship with God, meeting our greatest need, at great personal cost, due only to his great love. Through the gospel of Jesus

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Christ, our relationship with God is restored. God becomes our Father, we his sons and daughters, living in his fellowship now and forever.

The Bible is clear that the death of Jesus for sinners is how God demonstrates his love for sinners (see Rom. 5:8). Jesus didn't die in our place *so that* God would love us; he died in our place *because* God loves us. And God has loved us ever since he chose to set his love on us before the foundation of the world (see Eph. 1:4). This is *the most important truth* to remember in our relationship with God. He loves us relentlessly, and of course we don't deserve it. We never can, so we must not try. And I mean we must not.

Just recently I was meeting with a fellow pilgrim who talked with me in the way that pilgrims talk with pastors. He told me of his struggles and correlating doubts in the love of God, and he casually commented that he doesn't want to try to earn God's love. I interrupted him, not because I meant to be rude (though good news is worth a little perceived rudeness from time to time), but because he needed to know this wasn't an option. I told him he *must not* try to earn God's love, which is exactly what I wish someone had told me years ago. The love of God is simply a wonder we receive, humbly and gladly. That is what made the difference for Bunyan.

Sitting under the regular preaching of God's Word one day, hearing an average message delivered by an average pastor, Bunyan's heart was flooded with the reality of God's love. He came to know that God loved him despite his sin, and that nothing could separate him from this love (see Rom. 8:35–39). In Bunyan's own recounting, he says that he was so overcome with joy that he wanted to tell of God's love even to a flock of crows gathered in a field. Bunyan had found treasure, and that same treasure is there for us, barely hidden at all if we'd only open our eyes.

Because of God's love for us, Jesus died and rose to restore our relationship with God. Knowing God's love for us definitively, displayed in the gospel, is the key to the importance of relationships. We start here, with this vertical relationship, and we never get beyond its transformative importance.

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Internal — Our Relationship to Ourselves

It's not hard to see how our relationship with God (vertical) might impact how we relate to others (horizontal). When he was questioned about the greatest commandment, Jesus answered,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:37–40).

The vertical and horizontal must be held together, as Jesus makes clear, but there's another category that we need to acknowledge: our relationship to ourselves.

Another way to refer to this “relationship” is to call it our self-understanding. It is how we interpret our stories and come to terms with who we are. This is so natural to discipleship that I think the New Testament simply assumes it. Consider some of the autobiography in Paul's letters:

- “I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it” (Gal. 1:13).
- “I [was] a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee” (Phil. 3:5).
- “I worked harder than any of them ...” (1 Cor. 15:10).
- “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am foremost” (1 Tim. 1:15).
- “God has mercy on [Epaphroditus], and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow” (Phil. 2:27).
- “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me” (2 Cor. 12:8).
- “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live ...” (Gal. 2:20).

As we grow in this self-understanding, we also grow in relationship maturity, which shapes how we relate both to God and to others.

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Paul was a man who possessed self-clarity, which is the phrase used by Richard Plass and James Cofield in their book, *The Relational Soul*.² We are all wired in certain ways, shaped by countless factors that have been part of our lives (past events, emotions, and interpretations). Plass and Cofield say that our synthesis of these factors is what forms our self-understanding, or “self-clarity,” and *that* is the deepest influence in how we relate in general, whether to God or others.

Ten people might each react differently to the same incident, and it helps us to know why we react the way we do. In fact, Plass and Cofield, with their combined experience in helping Christians rebuild the wreckage of their ruinous choices, make the stunning observation that, “in all our years of ministry we have never known a single person whose relationships suffered because of lack of doctrinal facts.”³ In other words, one’s vertical relationship, by all appearances, might check out. “Professed theology” looks good on paper.⁴ “But,” Plass and Cofield continue, there are many stories of collapsed ministries, estranged marriages, distant children, failed friendships and coworker conflict because people had little self-understanding. The blindness that emerges from a lack of knowing what is going on in our souls is truly devastating. Self-clarity is not a parlor game. It is not a self-help gig. Instead it is a journey into our hearts to see what motives are at work in our relationships.⁵

Meaningful relationships with others, and even with God, require that we take ownership of our stories. It was the Puritan John Owen who said “Be killing sin or sin will be killing you.” Plass and Cofield might add, “Be owning your story or your story, full of implicit interpretations and unconscious memories, will be owning you.”⁶

And without doubt, we all have degrees of pain in our stories. Suffering is a sad and infuriating reality of our broken world. But no matter the suffering, no matter how intense, it will not have the final say.

The resurrection of Jesus makes this clear.

As writer Fred Buechner has said, the resurrection of Jesus means the worst thing is never the last thing, and that’s also true for who we are. God’s good purposes will endure, and they’re always bigger than any

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moment in which we find ourselves or conjure up by memory. I kick myself for not knowing a way to say this more deeply, but this next sentence is the best I can do, and I mean it as much as is humanly possible. While your suffering is real and has impacted you, it does not have to define you, because you have new life in Jesus' life.

That is what Paul is getting at when he says that “neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (Gal. 6:15), and “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). In Christ you are new, and that is what matters in the end — and today too — even if scars remain. All of us in Christ are new, and we each have proclivities of countless kinds. Whoever we are, a mixture of personality *and* environmental conditioning, shaped by the ways we've sinned in the past or been sinned against, we are each individual persons and God loves us. Each of us.

I've told my church that when God saves us, he doesn't stamp us “SAVED” and throw us into a faceless herd, but he saves us, his particular grace overcoming our particular brokenness. We become part of God's people — we enter his family — but he still knows our names and our hearts, and of course he does, because if it were not so Jesus would not have told us that God knows how many hairs are on our heads (see Luke 12:7). In fact, as Pastor Dane Ortlund explains, the things we most dislike about ourselves are the very places where God's grace abounds even more.⁷ The parts of our self-clarity that we're most likely to resent are the things that most attract Jesus.

I've heard it said that we can only surrender all that we know of ourselves to all that we know of God. Deepened knowledge of ourselves, then, together with deepened knowledge of God, leads to deepened surrender. We learn more about who we are so that we can keep turning it over to the reality of God's love. We are loved by God. That's who we are in the ultimate assessment. Over all other things that make us ourselves, we should hear the words of God spoken to Jesus as his baptism, now applied to us by our union with him, “This is my beloved child, with whom I am well-pleased” (Matt. 3:17).

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Even me?, you might think. *Yes, even you.* You and me, I must say. This is where self-clarity takes us, though each through individual paths. This work is vital to having meaningful relationships with others.

Horizontal — Our Relationship to Others

When our hearts are flooded with the reality of God's love, enough to make us want to preach to crows like it did for Bunyan, it can make everything else grow dim, in the most righteous of ways. It was the psalmist who said to God, "Whom have I in heaven but you? There is nothing on earth I desire besides you" (Ps. 73:25).

Nothing.

That kind of talk is a taste of heaven on earth, and I want some of that — don't you? But to the level that we have it, would that mean we don't need relationships with others? Can we be so consumed with God's love that we'd prefer a life of solitude, hidden away from all the distractions of this stupid world with its stupid people, just bunkered down in a hut somewhere by a pond until we depart to that which is "far better"? Is this "me-and-God" way of living the good life?

Of course not. But, if I'm honest, in my moments of acute relational need — when I would truly be helped by a horizontal relationship, such as my wife's affirmation or a friend's expressed care — I often chastise myself for not believing more in God's love for me. *If I really knew God loved me, I wouldn't need anything else, I can tell myself.*

That seems right, but it's not reality — at least not here, not yet.

Countless people have embraced the "Serenity Prayer" by Reinhold Niebuhr, but few remember that line when he asks God to help him take, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it.

This world as *it is*, or humans as we are, being blatantly sinful or just painfully plain, we need others. People need people.

In his book *Side by Side*, counselor Ed Welch says that *everyone needs help and everyone is a helper*.⁸ We're all both help-needers and help-givers. The Apostle Paul implies the same when he commands the whole church, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal.

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6:2). The burden-bearers and the one-anothers are the same. They're us. We're *receivers* and *givers*, and it's just part of being human. It's why life is relationships — and why loving your neighbor is inseparable from loving God.

But our horizontal relationships comprise a vast world that's hard to wrap our heads around. If horizontal relationships is a category, there are sub-categories beneath it that have their own sections in bookstores. Imagine how much ink has been spilled on books about marriage? The subject of parenting alone is vast enough to have its own sub-categories and niches, such as how to raise teen girl sisters in the age of smartphones when one is an over-achiever and the other over-clutters her locker. There's a book for that, somewhere.

So what might we understand about horizontal relationships in general that applies to horizontal relationships in particular?

Meanwhile, above and beneath all of it, the entire Christian life rests on the miracle of reconciliation with God, the restored peace that then shapes all relationships.

That's the goal going forward. I want to offer a way to think broadly about horizontal relationships grounded in biblical relationships that shape how we relate to one another.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Why does our vertical relationship with God affect all other relationships in our lives?
2. Why is self-clarity important in your growth as a Christian?
3. Are there any aspects of your internal relationship that need to be rediscovered or reinterpreted in light of God's love for you in Christ?

2

RELATIONAL CALLINGS AND KINDS

Let's zoom out for a minute and think in terms of *calling* and *kind*. There is our calling in relationships, referring to what God expects of us, and then there is the *kind* of relationship in which our calling plays out.

When it comes to calling, this is the interplay and overlap of *authority* and *responsibility*. Authority refers to what we have the right to do, what we're authorized to do; responsibility is what we are obliged to do, what we must do. Sometimes in relationships it's one or the other, sometimes both, sometimes neither — and it comes from God. Our relational calling is ultimately what he expects of us.

And these two callings — authority and responsibility — are central to how we engage relationships with others within a three-fold paradigm borrowed from the home. As it turns out, God made the home to be the foundational building block for human society, with its fathers (and mothers), brothers (and sisters), and sons (and daughters). Right away it's worth noting that these distinctions require a basic understanding of hierarchy. I realize that word makes people sweat and so much of our modern world has burned itself out trying to topple the very notion, but to fight against *hierarchy* is to fight against the universe. You cannot win, because God is God and he made the world this way. There are different kinds of relationships, on purpose, and they're expressed in God's design for the home. All other forms of how we relate to others are derived from this. The Westminster Larger Catechism makes this point in its exposition of the fifth commandment.

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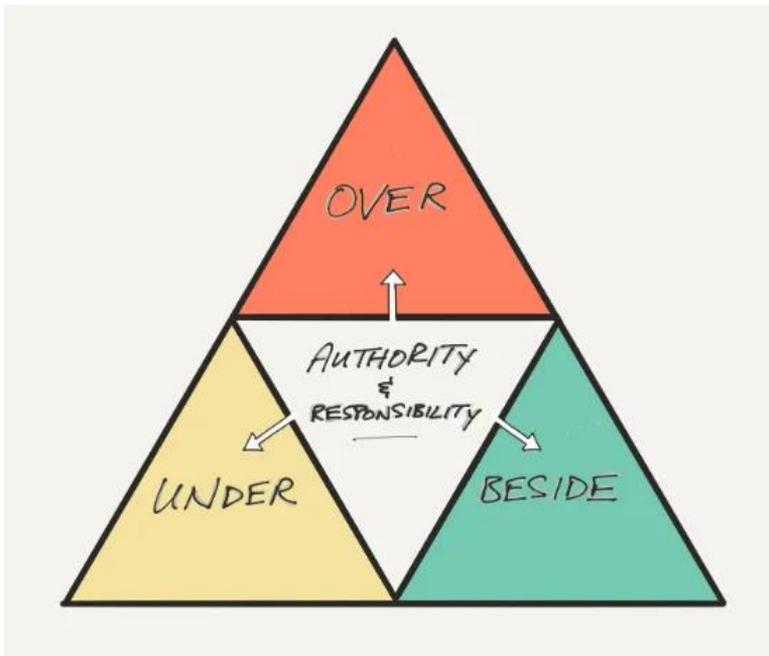
The fifth commandment in Exodus 20:12 states: “Honor your father and mother that your days may be long in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you.”

Question 126 of the catechism asks, “What is the general scope of the fifth commandment?”

The answer:

The general scope of the fifth commandment is, the performance of those duties which we mutually owe in our several relations, as inferiors, superiors, or equals.⁹ (emphasis added)

Another way to state these “several relations” — what we’re calling kinds — is as parents, siblings, and children. We relate to others as In-Relation-Over, In-Relation-Beside, or In-Relation-Under.



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In summary, our relational *callings* include authority or responsibility; our relationship *kind* is either over, beside, or under. In every relationship, we engage a certain *kind* of relationship from the God-ordained *calling* of authority and/or responsibility. Here's an example:

Applying Calling and Kind

I'm the father of eight children, and in relation to my children, I am *over them*. I engage that relationship with God-given *authority*. The relational *calling* is authority; the relational *kind* is in-relation-over. Practically, it means I can tell my sons to clean their room.

As my sons, they are called to the responsibility of obedience (see Eph. 6:1). They are to obey what I'm authorized to tell them, and they practice that responsibility in relation under me.

This is an easy example so far, but it becomes more complex. I have the authority as a father to give my sons directives about cleanliness — I engage the kind, In-Relation-Over, with the calling of authority — but do I also have a responsibility in those directives?

Yes, I do, insofar as room cleanliness is an aspect of raising my sons in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, which is what God tells me, as a Christian father, to do (see Eph. 6:4). Christian fathers always exercise their authority under God's authority, mediated through the local church. We are simultaneously In-Relation-Over (father-son) and In-Relation-Under (God-man). Fatherhood, in its calling, is an overlap of authority and responsibility. A father's authority, In-Relation-Over to his children, is an aspect of the father's responsibility to God, to whom he is In-Relation-Under.

So far, so good. Individuals with authority can also be under another authority. This is everywhere. It's true of every authority outside of God. But consider this:

What if one of my four sons decides to be a boss and order around his brothers? Is that okay, since the brothers are In-Relation-Beside and lack authority over one another?

In general, no, it's not okay, because brothers do not have authority over one another unless granted to them by their authority, the parents.

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Authority between those who are In-Relation-Beside has to be deputized by the authority over them. One brother can't command the others to fetch the foul balls, for instance, but he may reference dad and say to the others, appropriately, "Do not hide those socks under the bed." And he may appeal to the father when his brothers hide the socks anyway (the sock-hiders might call this "tattling," but it's basically a recognition of authority).

In all of this, we're learning what Christian relationships look like: how we relate under God, beside others, and in ways that reflect the call to loving your neighbor in both simple and complex situations. This framework helps us understand how biblical relationships function in everyday life and how every horizontal interaction flows from our relationship with God.

This happens so often in our everyday lives that we rarely recognize the relational dynamics in play. When I leave my boys to themselves in a room they've trashed, in what could become a scene from *The Lord of the Flies*, it's fascinating how often I've overheard one or two of them say, "Dad said ..." Dad said to put the laundry in the basket, therefore, "Do not hide those socks under the bed." They are In-Relation-Beside, but they evoke the fact that they share brotherhood as In-Relation-Under. They hold each other accountable to their authority, who has told them something about the room.

Can we apply calling and kind to other relationships?

As a father, I command my sons to clean their rooms, but I don't command Steve, my next-door neighbor, to clean his. Steve and I are In-Relation-Beside, like brothers. I have no authority over him, and no responsibility to him apart from the biblical commands of Christian witness and decency. I can't tell him to do anything unless it pertains to something we have a mutual agreement about, what we call contracts.

Contracts are the means by which people In-Relation-Beside, like siblings, attempt to live reliably and peaceably. Because they lack authority over one another, they mutually agree to submit themselves to a document they authorize to protect their interests. A signed document is what makes these contracts official, but our horizontal relational

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existence is often full of unwritten, amorphous contracts, mutually unspoken expectations. Or sometimes there are spoken promises, what we call giving our word. At this point, we're a step away from talking about the history of democracy and the idea of the "social contract theory." It's not a stretch to say that the United States finds its roots in a philosophy of human relationships — how a nation imagines relationship with others at a societal level.

The task before America's Founding Fathers, following their intellectual contemporaries in the eighteenth century, was how to set up a government of humans who are In-Relation-Beside, not merely subjects of a king. My favorite snapshot of this "contract" is a cartoon rendering of two guys in Yankee-doodle hats shaking hands, with one saying, "You don't kill me, I won't kill you." The other nods, "Sounds good." Life is relationships, and come to find out, nations are too.

So Steve and I, In-Relation-Beside, have an agreement about a lawn mower we share, but one that's simple enough to be unwritten. We've given our word to another. But beyond him gassing up the mower and storing it in his shed, I can't tell him anything about cleaning his room or over-seeding his lawn in the fall. I can't tell the new neighbor across the street either, even if his lawn needs it worse. Do you know what it's called when we disapprove of certain things about other people we're not authorized to correct? It's called judging. This is also why being judgmental becomes exhausting. Too many lanes, man. When Paul instructs us to pray for the purpose that we may lead peaceful and quiet lives (see 1 Tim. 2:2), he's not envisioning an agrarian utopia, but he likely does consider it a positive thing to mind our own lawns.

But now what if the new neighbor across the street builds a meth lab in his basement or starts trafficking Komodo dragons to sell on the black market? Do I command him to stop then? No, actually, I don't. I call the police. And the police will take it from there and enforce the law. The law, to which we are In-Relation-Under, is something my neighbor willingly subjected himself to when he bought a home within a municipality that forbids illegal drugs and exotic pets. All my neighbors really are nice folks, but you get my point. Neighbors are In-Relation-Beside, like siblings, but we are In-Relation-Under when it comes to the law,

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mediated through what we rightly call “the authorities” or “law-enforcement.”

Ultimately, learning to navigate these dynamics is part of learning how to love God love others in real-life, everyday situations.

The Role of Decency

Relational callings and kinds might help us get a handle on how to engage relationships, but there’s more. It’s one thing to consider neighbors to be In-Relation-Beside if they’re around your same age, but what if they’re old enough to be your grandparents? What if you’re a man and your neighbor’s a woman? What if you encounter them laying half dead alongside the Jericho Road? Even here, our relationship with yourself and the maturity that flows from it will influence how you discern what decency looks like.

Age, gender, and proximate manifest need does not determine the relational kind. Another neighbor a few doors down is old enough to be my grandfather, but his age doesn’t make him an authority over me. It does, however, influence the relational demeanor, what we might also call decency — a major ingredient in healthy biblical relationships.

Paul tells Timothy,

Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity. (1 Tim. 5:1–2 NIV)

Even if the relational kind is the same, we have a responsibility for how we treat one another. The verb “treat” is added in our English translations, but the idea is decency toward one another: behave in a way that is fitting to the social realities.¹⁰ So boy wrestlers should refuse to wrestle girls, even if the organizers of high school athletics are foolish enough to make wrestling a mixed sport. Our relational calling is the responsibility to show decency. This is also why it’s customary in some parts of our country for relatively younger men to refer to relatively older women with titles like “Miss.” To this day, even though I’ve spent nearly two decades outside the American South, it’s difficult for me to refer to a woman only by her first name if she’s old enough to be my mother. In

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fact, I call my own mother-in-law, who lives with my family, “Miss Pam.” Because I’m not a sociopath.

The Bible speaks directly to our relational decency in the relational kinds of over and under, as seen in the household codes of Paul’s letters (e.g., Eph. 5:22–6:9). Marriage, parenting, work-relations — God’s Word addresses them all. But the Bible also has much to say about how we behave among those to whom we are In-Relation-Beside. These principles help us live out our relationship with God in a way that actually transforms our conduct toward others.

The New Testament includes at least 59 commands directed at how we treat one another — often called “one another” passages — and they serve as the blueprint for relational decency. These commands find their roots in the second table of the Ten Commandments, summarized in the command to love your neighbor as yourself (see Matt. 22:36–40; Gal. 5:14; Rom. 13:8–10). I’m thinking of “one another” commands like “Be kind to one another” (Eph. 4:32); “Do not lie to one another” (Col. 3:9); “Show hospitality to one another without grumbling” (1 Pet. 4:9). This is relational decency.

And while these commands helpfully spell out how decency should look, most of our relational decency is unwritten, woven into the fabric of our social expectations. This is part of culture, and these expectations are easiest to recognize when they’re defied. Even in America today, with all of its cultural rot, most people still consider it shameful if a younger neighbor mistreats the elderly, or if a neighbor ignores someone in proximate manifest need. Some states even have laws in this regard, known as “Good Samaritan” laws. Put simply, these laws make it a misdemeanor offense if a person knows someone is in serious danger and yet refuses to intervene or contact emergency services.

I once encountered the exact scenario for which such a law was created.

I was driving through my Minneapolis neighborhood on an early morning, when it was still quiet but bright enough to see. At a stop sign, I suddenly heard a woman screaming, “Help! Help!” I looked to the left and saw a woman running toward me, a man aggressively chasing behind her. “Call 911!” she said frantically, as she rushed to my driver’s side window (the

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need was proximate and manifest). The man backed off but was still within view, and I made my weirdest phone call ever, partly because I told the dispatcher that the man was wearing a toboggan on his head, by which I meant hat, as in beanie. Where I grew up we called those toboggans. Confused, the dispatcher reported that the man chasing the woman was carrying a sled on his head as he ran. I sure hoped the police could spot that guy. Once I straightened out that detail, I relayed to the dispatcher that the woman did not appear injured and I stuck around at the stop sign until the police arrived, because that was the decent thing to do. But it's also the law around here, and a good one.

As neighbors, we are In-Relation-Beside, with no authority over one another, but decency is our responsibility. And that responsibility takes different forms due to age, gender, and proximate manifest need. When decency is practiced, it reflects not only good citizenship but traces of a restored relationship with God, which enables us to treat others according to his pattern for human community.

Decency Near and Far?

The adjective "proximate" is especially important in the twenty-first century. For most of history, manifest needs were always geographically proximate. The awareness of need was confined to what people personally encountered. It's different today, though, because of technology and media. At any given moment we can be aware of countless needs across the entire world. People have never known about more terrible things they can do nothing about. This tension alone often shapes how we think about our relationship with God, especially when we feel overwhelmed by suffering we cannot personally reach.

I was called to responsibility toward my neighbor that I heard and saw screaming for help, but I've also read about similar needs that I don't hear or see myself. What is my responsibility toward those people? Is it my responsibility to rescue the hurting and feed the hungry in different timezones? Does that include all 828 million people who hunger? Are there any limits to my responsibility to show decency toward those in need?

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First, to be clear, it is good anytime someone shows decency to those in need, regardless of how proximate the needs may be. That kind of engagement, though, is a unique calling and it is not everyone's responsibility. When someone is involved in that kind of ministry we might say that the person has a burden for that particular need. For example, you would need a burden to invest in clean water solutions for children in the Congo, but you don't need a burden to call the police when a neighbor is in imminent danger, running toward your car. That would be your responsibility, your duty, your calling. It's not something to pray about. You don't need to "Watch This Video" to conjure up compassion. This responsibility to show decency is determined by the need being proximate and manifest.

This is what Jesus teaches us in Luke 10, the famous parable of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:29–37). The man left for dead was clearly in need, desperate for low-risk intervention, yet the priest and Levite both ignored him. They didn't ignore him by deleting the newsletter or turning off the video, but they walked to the other side of the road to get away from him. They physically turned their heads and moved in a different direction from a dying man.

The Samaritan, though irreligious when compared to the previous passersby, had compassion on the injured man. Jesus said the Samaritan, the compassionate man, proved to be a neighbor. The Samaritan didn't go searching for every robbery victim in Palestine, but he helped the man in front of him, and so we call him "Good." It was relational decency, pure and simple, and such decency is our responsibility to every person we're In-Relation-Beside. It's what God expects of us, which we prudentially apply to others based on age, gender, and proximate, manifest need.

This responsibility is also what sets the bar for our mutual expectations within relationships. If we're all givers and receivers, as those In-Relation-Beside, how exactly should that look in particular relationships in normal circumstances? What is expected of us in our relationships when there's not a desperate need right in front of you? These are the kinds of principles behind relationship advice from the Bible, which grounds our everyday conduct in God's wisdom.

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Now that we've set a context for how to think about relationships broadly, it would help to drill down for more detailed application, especially when it comes to relational complexities.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. How does the category of “decency” inform some of your relationships?
2. What some examples of ways that unwritten relational decency might be defied?
3. What are some examples of over/beside/under relationships in your life?

3

NAVIGATING
RELATIONAL
COMPLEXITY

Life is relationships, and relationships are hard, and if we had to target one thing that makes them hard it would be ours and others' failure to meet expectations. Those expectations most likely have to do with needs. We're all help-givers, and sometimes we aren't great with that. And as help-needers, our expectations can be unrealistic. Understanding this tension is part of our relationship with God, because how we relate to him inevitably shapes how we relate to others.

Over time, if a person expresses needs that go unmet, that person develops relational mistrust, which leads to relational distress, which leads to that person no longer expressing their needs, or at least regressing in how they express them. You can imagine how this kind of relational mistrust and need-expression illiteracy plays out in relationships.

Worst of all, the reality of consistently unmet needs is one of despair, which is behind so much of addiction. Put simply, addiction is an attempt to escape despair. It's "our earnest bid to make our emotional worlds comfortable and untroubled."¹¹ And so much of that despair, of human discomfort and trouble, can be traced back to consistently unmet needs. People become desperate to get away from pain — and can we even begin to quantify how much pain in our world comes from relational brokenness? Even in this, we see how Jesus and relationships are connected, since Jesus repeatedly stepped into the lives of hurting people whose needs had gone unmet.

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Without doubt, this sobering fact raises the stakes of our foundational relationships in the home, but it also points to the power of relationships anywhere. It's hard to imagine a higher priority than to develop what's been called "relational intelligence." In short, we want to understand our relational expectations to understand our role as help-needers and help-givers.

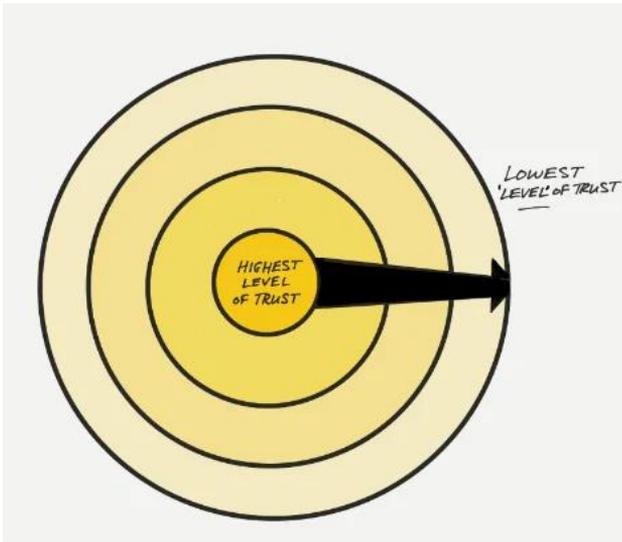
Whenever you're faced with a difficult relational situation where this seems unclear, your first step, before and unto God, should be getting clarity on the three parts: calling, kind, and decency.

- First, consider whether your calling is one of authority or responsibility, or both or neither.
- Second, identify the kind of relationship, whether you're acting as over, beside, or under, and what "contracts" might be in play.
- Third, apply decency to the relationship, which, to those whom we are In-Relation-Beside, is determined by the others' age, gender, or proximate, manifest need.

Once we've clarified these parts, one tool that might help us navigate the giving and receiving expectations is a relationship circle. There are numerous examples of these circles called by different names, but the basic idea is that every person (as a person-in-relation) has concentric circles that identify varying levels of relationships. These different rings, or levels, are distinguished by higher to lower levels of trust.

The inner circle is just what you'd expect. It's Level 1. These are the relationships where you have the highest level of trust, mutual love, and the clearest expectations of giving and receiving. You might call these people "Close Friends," which should include your immediate family but isn't limited to them. These people are your confidants and first calls in crisis, and therefore geographical proximity is necessary.¹² Even here, how you relate is often shaped by your relationship with God, since that vertical foundation influences how deeply you trust and love others.

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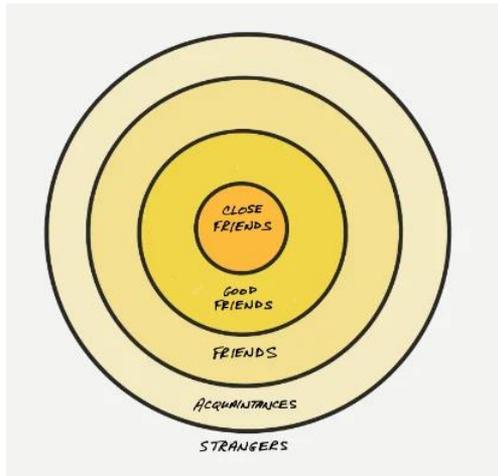
The second ring, Level 2, is what you might call “Good Friends.” These are people you enjoy and trust, but they are outside your inner circle for various reasons, often more practical than moral. This level still includes a high level of trust.

The third ring, Level 3, is a wider circle of people you know, often through a shared interest, and you could rightly call them “Friends.” You love and trust these people, but there isn’t the same amount of earned trust among these relationships as those closer to the center. When you refer to these people you might call them “friends” or “we go to the same church” or “we coached rec baseball together.”

The next ring, Level 4, is those you might consider “Acquaintances.” These are people you know, but you’ve not had much contact with them, even though it’s likely you both have mutual friends. These are not people you necessarily mistrust, but you also wouldn’t say you trust them. It’d be weird if you told these people that you love them.

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Those outside these four rings are who you'd consider "Strangers." These are people you do not know and should not trust, and it'd be weird if you did.¹³



Recently, my wife and I were on a flight, seated in front of a passenger who talked loudly to the person beside her, divulging sensational details about her ex-husband, the custody battle for her younger half-sister, some bodily injuries, and her musings about the divine, etc. Several passengers could hear her and eventually I had to put on my headphones. A few hours later, as we waited to deplane and this passenger continued talking, another passenger, older and wiser, interrupted her and said, "Dear, you shouldn't share so much with strangers!" This really happened. It was an incident that ten out of ten people would consider socially "off" — outside the norm of expectations.

And while we don't want to overshare with strangers, we also should be careful not to orient toward strangers in fear. "Stranger-danger" is good advice for young children, but adults should know better. One thing that baffles me is to see fellow humans walk past one another, nearly touching shoulders, and neither acknowledge the existence of the other. That should be as weird to us as the woman on the plane going on about her ingrown toenail. We share a glorious reality with every stranger we meet because we're both image-bearers of God. Nobody expects

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strangers to treat them like close friends, but I think our shared creatureliness deserves a “Good morning” and a smile, or at least a nod that kindly suggests, “I recognize your existence.”

Moments like these remind us that even the smallest interactions can reflect a relationship with God, and they help shape the kind of christ centered relationships we cultivate with others.

Levels for Discernment

These four relational levels — Close Friends, Good Friends, Friends, and Acquaintances — are meant to guide us practically when it comes to giving and receiving, being help-needers and help-givers. If the titles are throwing you off, you might prefer to refer to the levels as 1, 2, 3, and 4. Apart from proximate, manifest need — such as a woman running to you screaming for help — we have different relational expectations based on these different levels. Because we all have relationships of various kinds, the relationship circle immediately gets personal and practical. We have real people in our lives that fall within those four rings, and what is our responsibility to these different people?

For example, I recently had a Close Friend move west a few states. He made plans to drive a 26-foot long moving truck some 24 hours alone, through a section of the Rocky Mountains. He didn’t ask me for help, but I was convinced he needed it. I offered to accompany him on the trip and share the driving. Was I obliged to make that trip with him? Not exactly. I was not commanded by an authority over me. I was under no contract. But I did discern a responsibility to help — one that I would not have discerned for someone at the “Friend” level (Level 3), and probably not even at the “Good Friend” level (Level 2).¹⁴

To be sure, none of us will carry a relationship circle cheat-sheet in our back pocket, constantly pulling it out for reference — like in baseball these days when outfielders check the scouting report on every hitter that steps to the plate. But we at least subconsciously think in these terms. Looking back, I decided to help my close friend with the move because he was a bona fide close friend, recognized by the fact that he would have done the same for me, that he’s one of the few people I’d want to hang out with for 36 straight hours, and that he’s on the short list

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of people I'd never want to move away to begin with. You could call this a relational cocktail of mutuality, joy, and love — the sort of love shaped by a relationship with God that deepens how we give and receive.

We arrived safely and on time, easing the U-Haul into the driveway of his new house, greeted by an army of volunteers, all Friends at least, to help with the unload. But it's Close Friends who help people leave.

Think about your own relationship circle for a minute. Are you able to place faces in the first few rings? Which relationships are you unsure about where to place?

Keep in mind that none of these levels are fixed and immovable. Throughout different seasons of our lives, especially as our relational callings change, people move in and out of these levels. Our fundamental responsibility is always “decency,” but that can look different ways toward the same people at different times.

There is my biological brother, for instance. By most standards, I love and trust him as much as anyone, but we live halfway across the country from one another. We keep in contact, and if he had a manifest need, I'd do whatever I could to help him, all things considered. But I wouldn't consider him a “Close Friend” (Level 1) at this point in our lives, even though I would have considered him that in the past when we lived in the same city. Our biological brotherhood doesn't necessitate that we be even “Good Friends” (Level 2), but we are because of our love for one another and our similar priorities in life — not to mention some common interests, such as the St. Louis Cardinals.

And as we navigate these changing rings, we're reminded that our relationship with God helps us hold relationships with open hands — grateful, but not grasping — trusting Him through seasons of closeness and distance.

You could probably think of similar examples in your own life, of changing relationships, of friends come and gone. It would be appropriate to mourn the loss of these changes. In fact, you must mourn the loss, lest multiple losses compound over time to shrink your heart and distort you relationally. Are not these losses also a big part of what makes relationships hard?

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It's not uncommon in dating relationships for young men and women to have the occasional "DTR" conversation (define the relationship), but it's too awkward to talk like that with anyone else. It would be nice, though, wouldn't it? You sit down with your bestie and her husband and say, "Okay, it's official, we're Close Friends and we always will be, which means neither of our families will move away without the other." Staying married for a lifetime is challenging enough, close friendships over a lifetime are basically extinct. And that is okay.

Years ago, my wife and I were intimidated at the thought of moving to a new city, from Raleigh-Durham to Minneapolis-St. Paul. We were moving toward two acquaintance-contacts (Level 4), but zero friends. Days before we set out, in a casual conversation after a church service, our pastor's wife, sensing our trepidation, told us that God didn't owe us friends, but that they are a blessing he provides. That was nearly two decades ago now, and it is so wonderfully true. God has been kind to give us people in our lives with whom we give and receive, even if for a season. We've had more relational movement in those circles than I ever imagined, with a lot of joy and sadness mixed in. Life is relationships, and relationships are hard, but God is good. Moments like these also remind us how deeply every season of friendship is shaped by our relationship with God, who faithfully provides the people we need at the right time.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Can you identify people in your life at all four levels?
2. Which level would you consider your greatest relational need?
3. Are there people who would list you as a level 1 close friend? Are there ways you can grow as a help-giver to your own close friends?

4

THE GOAL OF RELATIONSHIPS

There are three categories of relationships: our relationship with God (vertical) is most important, followed by our relationship to ourselves (internal). These two shape our relationships with others (horizontal).

Within our horizontal relationships, we're all help-needers and help-givers. One broad way to think about relationships in general is in terms of *calling* and *kind*. What is our calling in the relationship? What kind of relationship is it? In every relationship we either have *authority* or *responsibility*, or both, or neither. That calling, whichever it is, is played out in three kinds of relationship: In-Relation-Over (like a parent), In-Relation-Beside (like a sibling), and In-Relation-Under (like a child).

The way we behave in each of these kinds of relationships is our relational decency. It means we act in a way that is fitting to the relational calling and kind. This is often clearer in cases of In-Relation-Over and under, but it requires more prudence with those to whom we are In-Relation-Beside. In these relationships, our responsibility to decency is determined by the other's age, gender, and proximate, manifest need.

In normal situations, unlike the Jericho Road experience, it's often still not clear what our relational expectations might be. A tool for navigating those expectations is a relationship circle, which categorizes our relationships in four levels of highest to lowest trust.

If we could hold all of this together — the calling and kind, relational decency, our varying expectations in light of the relationship circle — it

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would form our relational intelligence ... a daunting task, it may seem, but worth our efforts, especially when we remember what it's all about.

Focusing on the Goal

What is the *aim* in our horizontal relationships? Realizing that most of us aren't experts here, that we've made, and are yet to make, countless relational mistakes, what is the goal of relationships anyway?

Well, if our most important relationship is our relationship with God — if our greatest good is having God and our greatest need is to be reconciled to him — shouldn't our horizontal relationships have something to do with that?

John tells us that in the New Jerusalem there won't be any need for a sun, because the glory of the Lord will light the city (Rev. 21:23). And we imagine that just as the sun won't be needed then as it is now, horizontal relationships won't be either. We already know that there's no marriage in heaven (see Matt. 22:30), but what about close friends? Or is it that everyone is close friends? We don't know, but it's safe to say it'll be different, and one part that will be different is that we'll have arrived where we've been headed all along. We will finally be in the Celestial City, as John Bunyan calls heaven in *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Bunyan's masterpiece, first published in 1678, has reportedly sold more copies than any other book in the world next to the Bible. Written in the form of a travel story as an allegory for the Christian life, Bunyan details the journey of Christian, the main character, from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. Christian's pilgrimage, with its ups and downs and near insurmountable challenges, has encouraged countless Christians over the centuries. And perhaps one unsung wonder of the story is how it portrays the value of relationships. In every new scene, every dialogue, Christian finds himself as a person-in-relation, sometimes for good or ill. Ultimately, though, it's relationships that make the difference for him, giving him the help he needs to arrive safely in the presence of God.

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The final scene of Christian's journey makes this clearest. Christian and his friend, Hopeful, come in view of the city's gate, but "betwixt them and the Gate was a River, but there was no bridge to go over, and the river was very deep." The only way to get to the gate was to go through the River, but the way the River worked was that the more faith you had, the shallower the water. When your faith slipped, the water would get deeper and you'd start to sink. But Christian and Hopeful enter the River together.

They then addressed themselves to the Water, and entering, Christian began to sink, and crying out to his good friend Hopeful, he said, I sink in deep Waters; the Billows go over my head, all the Waves go over me. Selah.

Then said the other, Be of good cheer, my Brother, I feel the bottom, and it is good.¹⁵

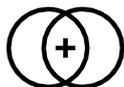
But Christian continued to struggle. Hopeful continued to comfort him.

Then Hopeful added these words, Be of good cheer, Jesus Christ maketh thee whole: And with that Christian broke out with a loud voice, Oh, I see him again! and he tells me, When thou passest through the Waters, I will be with thee; and through the Rivers, they shall not overflow thee. Then they both took courage together, and the Enemy was after that as still as a stone, until they were gone over.¹⁶

Just as Christian helped Hopeful earlier in their journey, Hopeful helped Christian here. Help-needers and help-givers, and the ultimate help we all need and give is to have God. In the end, the goal of every horizontal relationship, whatever the calling and kind and varying expectations, should be to help the other get God. We, as individuals-in-relation, want to be pointers, reminders, encouragers, and more, of who God is and what he has done in Christ to bring us home. Deep down, every Christ-centered relationship is meant to strengthen our relationship with God, drawing us closer to him as we journey through life.

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On our journey toward that last River, deep and treacherous as it may be, let us, in relationships, take courage together. And until that day we meet the Lord, a fictional angel might remind us that no man is a failure who has friends. Relationships are hard, but life is relationships.



END NOTES

1. Faith Cook, *A Pilgrim Path: John Bunyan's Journey*, (Evangelical Press, 2017), 39–43. See also, John Bunyan, 1666, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2018).
2. Richard Plass and James Cofield, *The Relational Soul: Moving from False Self to Deep Connection*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014).
3. Plass and Cofield, 109.
4. “Professed theology” (versus “lived theology”) is the phrase used by my mentor, Warren Watson. For more from Warren, check out “Change Is Truly Possible: Hope from Forty Years of Counseling,” May 14, 2019, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/change-is-truly-possible>; and “Still Saints: Caring for Christians with Personality Disorders,” January 3, 2019, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/still-saints>.
5. *Ibid.*, 109. Emphasis added. For a great example of self-clarity and its importance, see also Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: It's Impossible to Be Spiritually Mature, While Remaining Emotionally Immature*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017).
6. *Ibid.*, 100. The go-to quotation to drive home this point is the opening of John Calvin's *Institutes*. “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and or ourselves.” (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol 1., trans. Ford Lewis Battles, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 35.
7. Dane Ortlund, *Deeper: Real Change for Real Sinners*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021).
8. Edward T. Welch, *Side by Side: Walking with Others in Wisdom and Love*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015).

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9. Westminster Larger Catechism (<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/westminster-larger-catechism>); see also John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2008), 586.
10. The use of “decency” that I intend is the meaning of fittingness or appropriateness. This is different than the colloquial meaning of “decent” which is often used to express the lowest possible bar of acceptability. For example, one might ask, “How is the coffee?” The friend replies, “It’s decent.” The use here is to say that the coffee is actually bad but could be worse. It’s “decent” as in “I’m not going to spit it out, but I don’t really like it.” I am not using the word that way. Rather, I am using “decency” in the same meaning my mother first explained it to me. When my siblings and I were kids, Mom curtailed our barging through closed doors by teaching us to, first, knock, and then ask, “Are you decent?” In other words, is your appearance fitting to the occasion of my seeing you? Appropriateness is the meaning. Relational decency is a certain demeanor prudentially applied to our various relationships given the factors of age, gender, and proximate, manifest need.
11. Chip Dodd and Stephen James, *Hope in the Age of Addiction: How to Find Freedom and Restore Your Relationships*, (Grand Rapids: Revel, 2020), 73.
12. Jen Rigney, a Close Friend to my wife and me, read an earlier draft of this guide and noted a distinction among men and women on this point. She and my wife claim that it’s easier for women to maintain Close Friendships without geographic proximity, whereas it’s more difficult for men. My hunch is that lasting closeness in men’s relationships relies upon a common mission, which often requires geographic proximity. C. S. Lewis gets into some of these matters in his book, *The Four Loves*. See C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves: An Exploration of the Nature of Love*, 1960, (Boston: First Mariner Books, 2012 edition).
13. Granted, we must trust strangers at some level. The world depends on it. Referred to as “truth-default theory,” Malcom Gladwell explains this concept in his book, *Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know*

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About People We Don't Know, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2019).

14. This is not to say that you wouldn't make such a trip with a friend (Level 3), but in that case, you would most likely have other interests in play, such as you enjoy road trips, or you wanted to visit the Rocky Mountains, or you were eager to finish a podcast. The true rub of relational responsibility is the cost we're willing to give for the sake of the other. Where there is higher trust, we are willing to pay higher costs.
15. John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, 1678, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 182.
16. Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, 184.



THE
MENTORING
PROJECT

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