

# **Relationships: A Mess Worth Making**

## **By Timothy S. Land and Paul David Tripp**

Sometimes you accidentally run onto a book that you didn't even know you had and find out that it is a "must read." That happened to me as I was up extra early one morning, completed my morning routine, and had a few minutes before I needed to head out. So I grabbed a book out of the magazine rack that sits next to my chair and began to read. I almost couldn't put it down. To be honest I don't know where I got it or how long it had set idle, but God brought it to my attention at just the right time for me personally. In follow up discussions, I discovered where I had gotten it, AND that there is a small group study guide that makes a great companion piece: *Change and Your Relationships*. The author's web site describes it as a "Study Guide with Leader's Notes based off principles from the book Relationships: A Mess Worth Making, but it does not track chapter-by-chapter. It is designed as a stand-alone resource for individuals and small groups."

The following are some of the questions that came to my mind as I read the book and let the Spirit convict me and speak to my heart. This is not a substitute for you reading the book as I have not included any of the excellent mini-case studies they include. My focus is on making personal application of the books content.

### **Chapter 1: The Shortest and Most Important Chapter of this Book**

I found both statements to be true. It was short (two pages) and sweet. Sweet, because it introduced us to the authors, their relationship, and the reality that the book was written in the midst of relationship—not just some theories or theological platitudes. They wrote, "We have written as flawed people in close relationship who have experienced God's grace in daily life and ministry." (page 1)

Activity: Take a few minutes and pray about some relationships you have that need an extra touch of God's grace. Write the names of the individuals below and, before you go any further, make a note of the particular areas in each relationship that present challenges for you.

## Chapter 2: Why Bother

- A. If you had trouble coming up with names and issues, let me prime the pump with the opening paragraphs of this chapter:

I had such high hopes for our friendship. What went wrong? I thought I had finally found someone I could trust.

I can't believe you are questioning my integrity after all the things I have done for you. It's not like I am the only one who has failed in this relationship. You've hurt me, too.

You see, this is what you always do. I come to you and you turn the table on me. You are so good at making other people feel guilty for your failures! The problem with you is that you are much better at recognizing other people's faults than you are your own. You don't have a clue how much you have hurt me. You betrayed our trust when you told them what I said.

You never told me I couldn't say anything about what you shared with me. I didn't know you would be so sensitive about it.

I thought you cared enough for me that I wouldn't have to tell you not to talk to someone else! I thought our relationship was as important to you as it is to me.

You see, that's the problem. You always act like you are more committed to this relationship than I am. So you watch me like a hawk, just waiting to pounce on any hint of failure.

Why does it always go here? We can't even have a discussion about the weather without it ending in accusation.

Sound familiar? You know that you have disappointed others too. It should be clear to you that no relationship ever delivers what you dreamt it could. Your fantasy collides with reality, and reality bites! (page 4)

Activity: Take a minute and go back to your list above. This time as you write their names below, put next to the name the issues THEY have with you. Don't play coy and say, "I don't know." What have you heard them say?

Activity: Now once again look at your list of names and ask yourself, “How often have I said, or how often have I heard things like this?”

I can’t believe you would do such a thing for me! It is so encouraging that I did not have to go through this alone.

I’ve gotten as much as I have given. Your friendship has been a constant source of encouragement.

Yeah. You know, when we first met, neither one of us had any idea what God would do through our friendship.

What I appreciate is that while it hasn’t always been easy, you have been committed to dealing with our problems and disagreements in a constructive way. Your honesty is refreshing.

And you’ve modeled patience and a willingness to listen, even when it was hard. God has used you in my life to help me speak honestly, but in a more godly manner.

I suspect it won’t always be this comfortable, but it is encouraging that we are committed to dealing with our future problems this way.

- B. Take a moment to reflect on the relationships in your life. Think about the relationships in your family while you were growing up. What were the unspoken rules your family followed? How did you handle conflict? What was the typical method for solving problems? Were there regular patterns of forgiveness? Did you ever see forgiveness sought and granted? What were the normal ways you communicated? Who typically had the floor? Did you grow up in a quiet or loud family? What was conversation like around the dinner table? Were there certain taboo subjects or was everything fair game? How was anger expressed? Was it handled in a positive way? In the busyness of family life, how much investment was made in keeping relationships healthy? Were people motivated positively or with threats and guilt? Was your home a place to relax or did you feel like you were walking on eggshells? To what degree was serving one another modeled and encouraged within the family? What kind of relationship did your family have with the surrounding community? (pages 6-7)

Question: Have the values of your family become your values? In what specific ways?

Q: Have the struggles of your family become your struggles? In what specific ways?

- C. The authors note, “The fatal flaw of human wisdom is that it promises that you can change your relationships without needing to change *yourself*.” “Every painful thing we experience in relationships is meant to remind us of our need for Him. And every good thing we experience is meant to be a metaphor of what we can only find in Him.” Then the authors include the following C. S. Lewis quote:

When I have learnt to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now. In so far as I learn to love my earthly dearest at the expense of God and

*instead* of God, I shall be moving towards the state in which I shall not love my earthly dearest at all. When first things are put first, second things are not suppressed but increased. (pages 7-8)

Activity: Using your own words, what are the authors trying to tell you?

- D. Acknowledging that the topic of relationships has been written on extensively and comprehensively, they still think it is important to lay a biblical foundation for everything they say in the book. So the following eight biblical facts make up the balance of the chapter.
1. *You were made for relationships*—the authors go back to Genesis and point out the relational nature built into us when we were created.
  2. *In some way, all relationships are difficult*—this goes back to Genesis where our struggle with sin is revealed. If we are to enjoy any progress or blessings in our relationships, we have to admit our sin humbly and commit ourselves to the work of grace provided by God.
  3. *Each of us is tempted to make relationships the end rather than the means*—they are saying our vertical relationship with God provides the foundation for our horizontal relationships with one another, and when we reverse the order and elevate creation above Creator, we destroy the relationships God intended.
  4. *There are no secrets that guarantee problem-free relationships*—there may be value in strategies and techniques, but the Bible says that Christ is the only real hope for relationships because only He can dig deep enough to address the core motivations and desires of our hearts.
  5. *At some point you will wonder whether relationships are worth it*—the health and maturity of a relationship are not measured by an absence of problems, but by the way the inevitable problems are handled. Even in times of peace, you must be vigilant regarding the way your relationships can be hijacked by the underlying desires of your hearts, which are subtly and constantly shifting.
  6. *God keeps us in messy relationships for His redemptive purpose*—what happens in the messiness of relationships is that our hearts are revealed, our weaknesses are exposed, and we start coming to the end of ourselves. Only then do we reach out for the help God alone can provide.
  7. *The fact that our relationships work as well as they do is a sure sign of grace*—considering our sin nature, it is amazing that people get along at all! If you look for God in your relationships, you will always find things to be thankful for.
  8. *Scripture offers a clear hope for our relationships*—scriptures offer hope that our relationships can be characterized by things like humility, gentleness, patience, edifying honesty, peace, forgiveness, compassion, and love.

Q: Which of the eight biblical principles gives you the “greatest heart burn” and why?

Q: Which of the eight biblical principles gives you the greatest hope and why?

### Chapter 3: No Options

- A. Everyone has at one time or another asked in a time of frustration, “Why do I bother with other people?” The author’s answer is, “We know we are less than human when we are all alone.” They continue by stating, “We live with this tension between self-protective isolation and the dream for meaningful relationships.” They use the following graphic to describe this tension:



- Q: Where are you on the continuum right now?  
Q: Are you moving away from others because of a recent hurt?  
Q: Are you moving toward others because you have been alone too long?  
Q: What tendency do you observe in your life—do you move towards isolation or immersion, independence or codependence? (pages 16-17)

- B. Where we are on the continuum varies with each relationship, but for most of us, *our problems* tend to cluster on one end of the continuum or the other. In most cases, whatever problems we have in relationships tend to fit one of three relational profiles”

1. *The frustrated relationship* is created when one person moves toward isolation while the other moves toward immersion. The isolationist feels smothered while the immersionist feels rejected and the result is that both individuals are perpetually disappointed.
2. *The enmeshed relationship* is created when both people move toward immersion. Because their expectations for the relationship are so high, they tend to live in isolation from other people. This kind of relationship is exhausting because the work required makes peace impossible.
3. *The isolated relationship* is created when both people move toward isolation. This results in an empty and disappointing relationship. (pages 18-19)

- Q: Take a close look at each of the significant relationships in your life and if they are unhealthy put the name of the individual beside the type of relationship that best describes each of them.

Frustrated:

Enmeshed:

Isolated:

- C. The authors claim at this point the difference between this book and most books on relationships is that they begin with our vertical relationship with God before tackling our horizontal relationships with one another. They then provide the following quote from Miroslav Volf:

Because the Christian God is not a lonely God, but rather a communion of the three persons, faith leads human beings into the divine *communio*. One cannot, however, have a self-enclosed communion with the triune God—a “foursome,” as it were—for the Christian God is not a private deity. Communion with this God is at once also communion with those others who have entrusted themselves in faith to the same God. Hence one and the same act of faith

places a person into a new relationship both with God and with all others who stand in communion with God.

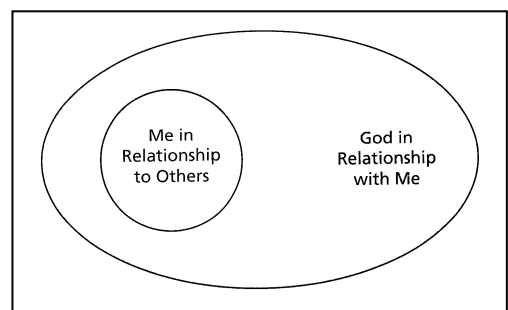
They go on to say, “Rightly understood, theology is the real life story of God’s relationship to us and our relationship to one another lived out in a broken world.” (page 20)

Activity: Take a few minutes to re-read and reflect upon Volf’s quotation and the author’s assertion about theology. Then write below your reflections, assessment, criticisms, etc.

D. The authors wrote, “All people assemble a set of “facts” that they believe are true. These facts function as a lens that is used to interpret life and relationships. The Bible is the only reliable life-interpreting facts.” With this assumption in mind, and with an eye to John 17:20-26, they identify the following eight Biblical principles regarding relationships:

1. *God is the only properly functioning community in the universe*—God knows how to help us with our struggles with community (relationships) because He is a community.
2. *The Trinity is the only adequate model for human community*—when our relationships aren’t working as they were designed, we can look to the Trinity as a model of how it can be done right.
3. *People made in God’s likeness were made for community*—Even though we are flawed people in flawed relationships, we are created to be social beings. Community with one another is not just a duty; it is an aspect of our humanity.
4. *God has a two-fold purpose for human community: personal growth and witness to the world*—As we live together we must always keep the bigger agenda of God’s glory and our purpose in view.
5. *Sin’s self-centeredness cuts us off from God and others*—Jesus would not have had to die on the cross if we could manufacture this kind of community on our own.

6. *True human community only arises out of communion with God*—On this point the authors provide the graphic on the right to visually describe this reality.



7. *Christ’s resolve confirms the commitment made by the Father, Son, and Spirit before the creation of the world*—Jesus did not manufacture a new idea for human relationships, He simply reflected what God’s design has always been.
8. *God will dwell in community with His people so that they can know community with one another*—God’s Holy Spirit dwells within us to empower us to live in community.

Activity: Take a few minutes to re-read and reflect upon these eight points. For example, it dawned on me for the first time that the three co-equal persons of the trinity modeled submission as Jesus the Christ and the Holy Spirit submit to the perfect will of the Father. What a picture for us as husband and wife and as pastor/elder/leaders and church members. Or maybe in any relationship? What did God reveal to you?

- E. “Ultimately, we can never escape our essential nature—who and what God designed us to be. This relational characteristic is central to who we are; it leads us to do great good and great evil. This was demonstrated by the terrorism and heroism that took place simultaneously on September 11, 2001. The hatred of one community for another led to death and destruction; but the love other people had for their community produced amazing acts of courage, kindness, and self-sacrifice. Only when human beings live in community do we fully reflect the likeness of God.” (pages 25-26)

Q: Think about some times when you have lived out God’s model for community. What was required of you and what were the results?

Q: Now think about some times when you lived out your fleshly passions within community. What changed and what were the end results?

- F. “If my identity as a human being is tied to community, then to deny, avoid, escape, misuse, exploit, or destroy it is to deny my own humanity. In contrast, every time you move toward someone in compassion, you affirm your humanity. Because of the coexistence of sin and grace, we all shift between denying and affirming our humanity. John Calvin said, ‘For errors can never be uprooted from human hearts until a true knowledge of God is planted therein.’ 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.” (pages 26-27)

Activity: Go back to the graphic on page 7 that the authors used to describe the reality that “True human community only arises out of communion with God.” [D6 above] Then reflect on their statement, “The circle of human community is only healthy when it exists within the larger circle of community with God.” Now stop and think about some of the challenging experiences you have had seeking to live within the community called the “Body of Christ.” If we as professing Christians can’t find a way to live in harmony (unity within a world of diversity), how on earth can those apart from Christ be expected to live in harmony? More importantly, how can we be “attractive” [don’t go “attractual vs “missional” on me] to the lost if our relationships are no different than what they experience in the flesh?

## Chapter 4: Sin

A. Your best relationship—no matter who it's with—is messy! Stop and think about your most satisfying relationship. (If you have difficulty, we have proven our point.) Ask yourself these simple questions about this relationship:

- Have you ever felt misunderstood?
- Have you ever been hurt by what the other person said?
- Have you ever felt like you haven't been heard?
- Have you ever been betrayed?
- Have you ever had to work through a misunderstanding?
- Have you ever disagreed on a decision?
- Have you or the other person ever held a grudge?
- Have you ever experienced loneliness even when things were going well?
- Have you ever been let down?
- Have you ever doubted the other person's love?
- Has the other person ever doubted your commitment?
- Have you ever struggled to resolve a conflict?
- Have you ever wished you didn't have to give or serve?
- Have you ever felt used?
- Have you ever thought, *if I had only known!*

Q: The Bible assumes that relationships this side of eternity will be messy and require a lot of work. If this applies to our *best* relationships, how much more does it apply to relationships that are more difficult! (pages 31-32)

B. It is tempting to look at the trouble in our relationships and locate the problem outside ourselves. And it's true: the other person *is* inherently weak and sinful! Unfortunately, so are we. Sin affects us all in six basic ways:

1. Self-Centeredness
2. Self-Rule
3. Self-Sufficiency
4. Self-Righteousness
5. Self-Satisfaction
6. Self-Taught

The authors elaborate on these six areas in the following table which is on page 36 of the book.



	Seeks / Wants	Acceptable Cost	Nightmare / Fear	Others' Experience	Telltale Emotion / Action
<b>Self-Centeredness</b>	Attention, approval	Will sacrifice control and independence	Rejection, not being recognized or affirmed	Others feel used, minimized, smothered	Anxious, needy
<b>Self-Rule</b>	To be right, in control	Will sacrifice intimacy and unity	Being seen as wrong, being dependent	Others feel coerced, manipulated	Angry
<b>Self-Sufficiency</b>	Independence, time alone	Will sacrifice intimacy, mutually helpful community	The dependence and neediness of others	Others feel ignored, unappreciated	Cold, distant
<b>Self-Righteousness</b>	Being right in the eyes of others	Will sacrifice relationships that challenge or confront	Being wrong, guilty, or condemned	Others feel challenged, condemned, or dismissed	Aggressive, argumentative
<b>Self-Satisfaction</b>	Pleasure (self-defined)	Will sacrifice community if inconvenient	Others interfering with personal pleasure	Others feel like objects, not companions	Controlling, demanding, dissatisfied
<b>Self-Taught</b>	A platform for one's own opinion	Will sacrifice growing together if you disagree	Being told what to think, say, and do	Others feel patronized, disrespected	Opinionated, domineering

Q: Knowing that the human heart struggles with all six of these areas, where are you personally most susceptible? Why do you think you struggle most in these areas?

- C. In a section entitled *What about the Bad Things People do to Me?* The author's note that "the Bible is filled with examples that deal honestly with victimization, from the murder of Abel in Genesis 4 to the persecution of the church in Revelation. There are countless stories of people sinning against each other. The NT is full of exhortations calling us to exercise patience, forbearance, and compassion, to revoke revenge and anger, to forgive others and love our enemies. The Bible mentions these things because God knows we will be sinned against frequently."

Micah 6:8 gives us direction regarding our reactions to sin: "He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Even when our hearts have been horribly damaged by the sins of another, we are to guard our hearts so that we are not sucked into sin's destructiveness. When someone sins against us, we are tempted to sin. So our need for Christ is as big when we are sinned against as it is when we sin. Scripture's calls for patience, humility, forgiveness, and gentleness are not calls to passivity. Holding grudges, becoming bitter, praying for vengeance, and gossiping are not methods that God honors. When you hold the perpetrator "accountable," but not in a spirit of humility, patience, and compassion, you end up perverting the very justice you seek. (pages 38-39)

Q: Think about the last time you were sinned against. Reflect on your reaction. On a continuum between “I acted like Jesus” to “I acted like the devil” where did you land?

Q: What could you have done differently that would have moved you closer to the “acted like Jesus” end?

- D. The closing section of the chapter is on the topic of God’s grace for this struggle. They note that, “every good relationship we have is a gift of God’s grace. Left to ourselves, nothing good would happen! Have you ever wondered how two non-Christians can have a reasonably good relationship? It is because the very God they deny is showing them His grace and blessing despite their ignorance.”

Think of what God has given to help us navigate relationships in a fallen world. He has given his *Word*, which is rich with wise principles. He has given us his *Spirit*, who convicts us when we are wrong, empowers us to seek forgiveness, and enables us to show compassion to those who have wronged us. He has given us a community of *fellow Christians*, where we receive ongoing correction and encouragement.

The authors wrote, “We hope you will become more realistic (and less fearful) about the struggle of relationships, while gaining a more hopeful grasp of the grace God gives for that struggle.” (pages 39-40)

Activity: Take time to think about how God has specifically revealed His grace to you in the three critical areas they mention:

God’s Word:

God’s Spirit:

God’s People:

## Chapter 5: Agendas

- A. As a task oriented person, this was a particularly challenging chapter. They begin with this personal reflection activity. “As you read the following statements, see if you can pick out the underlying agenda:

- I am so happy we don’t argue like we used to.
- I just love being with you.
- I’m enjoying the time I am spending with my family.
- I am so thankful for my friends.
- You’ve been so good to me.
- It’s great to know that I have found someone I can truly trust.
- We’re such kindred spirits.
- It’s wonderful how our personalities are so complementary.
- This has been fun; let’s get together again.
- We have such a great sex life.

- Before I met you, I was so lonely.
- It's great we have known each other for so long.
- We've had so many nice times together.
- We've had our problems, but we have always been able to work through them.

Who wouldn't want to be able to say these things about their relationships? All of these things are good. But what is the agenda in each of these statements? It's what the person gets out of the relationship. For all of us as self-centered people, this agenda for personal happiness is very seductive. Sin always draws us toward self-interest. It is possible that even our most altruistic moments are driven by what we get out of them.

What the Scriptures say about relationships is utterly unique. These two themes predominate:

- The power of self-interest is still present in the believer—It will remain a reality even in your best relationships. In fact, the more satisfying the relationship, the less conscious you will be of self-interest.
- God has a bigger agenda for our relationships than we do—The default questions we ought to bring to every area of life should be, “What is God's purpose and design? What was His reason for creating this relationship?” (page 42-43)

Activity: Take a few minutes and list two or three of the most important and/or best relationships you have—it might be that the most important right now isn't your best! Beside each person's name confess the areas where your self-interest is taking the lead. Now go back and put next to their name, to the best of your knowledge and understanding, what is God's purpose and design for that specific relationship?

- B. The balance of the chapter is a three-part exposition of Ephesians 4 under the overarching title of *A Road Map to a Bigger Agenda*. As you read and reflect on their insights they encourage you to ask yourself what it says about (1) the struggle of self-interest and (2) God's agenda for our relationships.

Part I: A Call to Unity (Ephesians 4:1-6) You can't take the gospel seriously and not take your relationships seriously. But, we tend to make compromises that negatively impact our relationships without seeing the contradiction. As you read the following list, ask yourself if this is how you think about your relationships. It may be helpful to use this list to think about one particular relationship.

1. *Maintain the unity of the Spirit*—Paul wrote that we are to maintain, not create these relationships. If you are a Christian, you automatically are in a relationship with other Christians. These relationships are gifts to be managed with great care. I am either being a good or a bad steward of these gifts.
2. *Make every effort*—Relationships, even among people who have the Spirit, will not be easy. Have you ever noticed how distasteful, unsatisfying, and uninteresting relationships suddenly become when they require work? How many marriages have suffered because neither husband nor wife had a biblical work ethic for their relationship?

3. *Be humble, gentle, patient, and forbearing in love*—they ask four powerful processing questions:
  - Do you hold others to a higher standard than you do yourself?
  - Do people regularly feel bruised in their relationship with you?
  - Do you love people with limits that are driven by your own perceived needs or interests?
  - Do others feel as if they must always return a favor to keep you happy with them?
4. *There is one Spirit, one Lord, and one Father*—Paul points to the unity of the Trinity, a concept the authors expounded upon in chapter three. (Pages 44-47)

Activity: If you didn't take their advice and think about one particular relationship as you read through the four points above, take a few minutes and do it now.

### C. Part II. An Appreciation of Diversity (Ephesians 4:7-16)

1. *To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it*—We have different gifts, serve in different capacities in the body of Christ, and are at various levels of spiritual maturity.
2. *So that the body of Christ may be built up*—Our purpose is to get what we want, but God's purpose is to give us what we really need. God ultimately wants us to mature, to be built up, and to stop acting like infants. God has designed our relationships to function as both a diagnosis and a cure. When we are frustrated and ready to give up, God is at work, revealing the places where we have given in to a selfish agenda (the diagnosis). He then uses that new awareness to help us grow precisely where we have struggled (the cure).

We enter relationships for personal pleasure, self-actualization, and fun. We want low personal cost and high self-defined returns. But God wants high personal cost and high God-defined returns. And, although we frequently disagree with God, His plan is better.

Beneath all our conflict with others lies a deeper conflict between these two agendas: ours and Gods. (pages 47-49)

Q: My experience has been that I struggle most with two types of people: those who are most like me and those who are my polar opposite. Look at some of the relationships where you are struggling. Is this true in that relationship? If so, then we need to celebrate what God is doing in their gifting as well as ours.

Q: Stop and ask God to show you how His body can be built up through the unique gifting of those with whom you are currently struggling.

D. Part III. Our Struggle and God’s Agenda (Ephesians 4:17-32)

<b>Tendencies of the sinful heart that are damaging to relationships</b>	<b>Ways that God provides grace when we are willing to fight for relationships</b>
<i>The tendency toward self-indulgence (vs 19-24)</i> My behavior in the relationship is driven by what I want, not God’s purpose	How much wiser God’s plan is for us than our plan for ourselves (vs 19-24)
<i>The tendency toward deceit (vs 25)</i> I will manipulate the truth to get what I want out of the relationship.	The life-changing power of truthfulness (vs 25)
<i>The tendency toward anger vs 26-27)</i> I want to control the relationship by venting my anger or by holding it over you to control you.	The healing benefit of gentleness, patience, and love (vs 26-27)
<i>The tendency toward selfishness (vs 28)</i> I want to protect what I have, rather than offer it to serve you.	The joy of serving the needs of someone else (vs 28)
<i>The tendency toward unhelpful communication (vs 29-30)</i> Rather than use my speech to make you feel better and put you in a better position, I speak to make myself feel better and ensure that I am in the top spot.	The value of loving and wholesome communication (vs 29-30)
<i>The tendency toward division (vs 31)</i> I give in to the temptation to view you as an adversary, rather than a companion in the struggle of relationship.	The beauty of functional unity in a relationship (vs 31)
<i>The tendency toward an unforgiving spirit (vs 32)</i> I want to make others pay for their wrongs against me.	The freedom of practicing forgiveness (vs 32)

According to Ephesians 4, the highest joys of our relationships grow in the soil of the deepest struggles. Struggles are not obstacles, but instruments in God’s hands.

Q: Think about your relationships. Which are the most meaningful? Aren’t they the ones that have lasted over time and have gone through excruciating difficulty?

Q: If you look at your own character, wasn’t some of your deepest growth born out of great stress and trial? (pages 49-51)

The rest of the book is about doing the “hard work” it takes to have good relationships. But the authors assure us that it will be the best work we will ever do.

**Chapter 6: Worship**

A. Struggle in relationships is everyone’s story. None of us has ever had a relationship completely free of struggle. Think about the people you encounter daily. Where do those relationships get

difficult? Is there someone you love who also drives you crazy? Is there someone in your life you would like to rewire? Are there times when you experience a spiritual disconnect with a person you know and love? Are there times when someone's opinion of you becomes too important? Do you find yourself fighting over things that aren't that significant? Have you ever been shocked by a person's response to a certain situation? Have you ever thought it would be easier to be alone than to walk through the minefield of relationships?

We have talked a little about why our relationships are so difficult and time-consuming. But what are the foundations of a healthy, God-honoring relationship? What are the daily thoughts, desires, and habits that make a relationship good? Why do you struggle with one person one way and a different way with another? (page 55)

- B. Good relationships are always built on the foundation stones of *identity* and *worship*. Even though these ideas may seem distant from our daily struggles, nothing can shelter our relationships from difficulty if we aren't building community on this foundation. By *identity* we are talking about how you define yourself—what talents, qualities, experiences, achievements, goals, beliefs, relationships, and dreams you use to say, "This is who I am." By *worship* we do not mean the order of service at your church on Sunday morning. *Worship* is what we are desiring, what we are living for, our goal, what we treasure, what we value, our purpose for life, or the cravings that control our heart. The theology you live out is much more important to your daily life than the theology you *claim* to believe. (pages 56-57)

Q: Definition of terms is always important in understanding what someone else is saying. If you didn't pick up their specific definitions for *identity* and *worship* then take a minute and re-read section B.

- C. They use the title *Remembering Who You Are* to discuss the identity cornerstone. Who you tell yourself you are has a very powerful impact on the way you deal with the big and small issues of daily life. In the same way, where you find your identity will have everything to do with how you respond to the hard work of relationships with others. Either I get my identity vertically, out of my sense of who God is and who He made me in Christ, or I will seek to get my identity horizontally, out of my circumstances, relationships, and successes. When we live out of a sense of who we are *in* Christ, we live our lives based on all we have been given *by* Christ. This keeps us from seeking to get those things from the people and situations around us. When I relate to you knowing that I am God's child and the recipient of His grace, I am able to serve and love you. I have the hope and courage to get my hands dirty with the hard work involved when two sinners live together in community. When I remember that Christ has given me everything I need to be the person He has designed me to be, I am free to serve and love you. When I know who I am, I am free to be humble, gentle, patient, forbearing, and loving as we navigate the inevitable messiness of relationships. (pages 57-60)

Another way of saying this is that your identity and significance is not based upon who you are but upon whose you are.

Q: Is there evidence that you are looking to your relationships to give you things you have already been given in Christ?

- D. The other cornerstone, worship, is discussed under the title *Remembering Who God Is*. Worship is first an *identity* before it becomes an *activity*. In Matthew 6:19-24, Christ reminds us that we all live for some kind of treasure. What we decide is valuable is what will control our hearts (v. 21). When you get what you think is valuable, you are happy and encouraged; when you don't, you are sad and frustrated. Christ says that what controls our hearts controls our behavior (v. 24). If something is valuable to us, we will seek to get it through the situations and relationships of daily life. This has many implications for relationships, because only when I am worshiping God for who He is am I able to love you as you are.
- E. To help us make the connection between the two foundation stones, the authors point out three specific truths.
1. To love you as I should, I must worship God as Creator—if I do not see the wise work of the Creator when I look at you, it will affect the way I relate to you.

Activity: Take a few minutes and review critical relationships in your life where you are currently struggling. Do you value who they are, how God has made them, and see how His kingdom can benefit from their unique gifting? In other words, can you see the wisdom of the Creator in how He is shaping and molding them?

2. If I am going to love you as I should, I must worship God as Sovereign—God determined exactly where each of us would be born, the parents who would raise us, and the culture in which we would live. He determined that you would be involved in relationships and situations outside your home that would also have a powerful influence on everything you do. Relationships are the intersection of two life stories written by God. If I fail to honor God's sovereignty in the influences He has placed in my life and the way those influences have shaped me, I will attempt to take God's place and try to shape them into my image.

Q: Are you frustrated with someone in your life? Have you been trying to reshape them to fit into your personal preferences?

3. To love you as I should, I must worship God as Savior—None of us ever gets to be in relationship with a finished person. God's redemptive work of change is ongoing in all our lives. When I forget this, I become self-righteous, impatient, critical, and judgmental. When I fail to worship God as Savior, I am too casual about my sin and too focused on yours.

Q: Are you trying to do work in someone's life that only the Savior can do?

## **Chapter 7: Talk**

- A. Your everyday communication influences the shape, quality, and direction of your relationships. You don't do this in grand moments of oratory. You do it in quick side comments in everyday situations. It is easy to forget the impact our words have on every relationship. There has never been a good relationship without good communication. And there has never

been a bad relationship that didn't get that way in part because of something that was said. (pages 71-72)

Activity: Compare one of your good relationships with one of your worst. How different is the communication process between the two extremes. Does your experience match the author's statement above?

B. The balance of the chapter is divided into three main sections: God's Perspective on Our Words, A Radical Commitment to the Call of Christ, and Talking Like an Ambassador. In the first section they make the following points:

1. *Our words have power*—"Words kill, words give life; they're either poison or fruit—you choose." (Proverbs 18:21 Eugene Peterson translation). Words are like vectors—they have force and direction. Words have the power/force to "kill or give life." They also have direction. They are either going toward life or toward death.
2. *Our words belong to the Lord*—Words have a high and holy calling. Words separate us from the rest of creation, making us more like God than like animals. The gift of words calls us to live and speak in a God-focused and God honoring manner.
3. *The world of talk is a world of trouble*—"If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check." (James 3:2b) If you are honest, you have to admit that your relationships have been troubled by words as much as they have been helped.
4. *Word problems are heart problems*—"The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil store up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks." (Luke 6:45) Have you ever said, "Oops, I didn't mean to say that!" Often it would be more accurate to say, "I'm sorry I said what I meant!" (pages 70-72)

Q: As you reflect on your daily conversation style, which of the four Biblical truths gives you the greatest challenge?

Q: Stop and think about their statement *The world of talk is a world of trouble* in light of the volume of words that surround us every day. Our airways are filled with words via talk radio, reality TV, social media, and 24/7 news cycles. To what extent do you think this volume of mostly unfiltered words fed the lack of civility in our national political discourse?

C. Under the title *A Radical Commitment to the Call of Christ* the authors state, "What we say must be driven by what God is seeking to accomplish in us and in the other person." They go on to point out that God is in the reconciliation business. He is working in every situation and relationship to reclaim our wandering hearts. He wants to make us people who are more interested in what He wants for us than what we want for ourselves. Our words are always in pursuit of some kind of kingdom. We are either speaking as a mini-king, seeking to establish our will in every relationship and circumstance, or we are speaking as an ambassador of Christ (II Corinthians 5:2), seeking to be part of what the King of Kings is doing. (pages 73-74)



Activity: Take an honest and hard look at the conversations you have had in the past 24 hours. How often were you promoting a mini-kingdom for yourself vs His Kingdom? Now take this concept with you and in the next couple of days and filter every conversation through the question whose ambassador will I be in this conversation.

- D. The final section continues to look at our role as an Ambassador for Christ. Using Ephesians 4:29-30 as their text, they state, “If you want your words to reflect what God wants more than what you want, you should consider three things:
1. Consider the person (“only what is helpful for building others up”)—wholesome communication is other-centered communication. When my words are shaped more by my interests than yours, they will lose their shelter from difficulty. The words of an ambassador are always other-centered.
  2. Consider the problem (“According to their needs”)—An ambassador’s words always address the person’s true need in the moment.
  3. Consider the process (“that it may benefit those who listen”)—An ambassador seeks to speak the right thing in the best way at the right time. (Pages 74-75)

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”(Ephesian 4:29-30)

Activity: Think about three difficult conversations you had recently. Reflect back on them and ask yourself in each of those conversations how much did you focus on the other person, did you take time to understand and address their problem, and were you willing to use a process in which you spoke the right things in the right way at the right time?

## **Chapter 8: Obstacles**

- A. Conflict with others is one of God’s mysterious, counterintuitive ways of rescuing us from ourselves. All kinds of suffering, including conflict with others, can be redemptive because of the grace of God. It’s inevitable. If you live with other sinners, you will have conflict. The closer you are to someone, the more potential there is for conflict. Relationships are costly, but so is avoiding them. When it comes to conflict what is your tendency? Do you avoid conflict? Do you rush into it? Or do you move into conflict with a God-centered perspective? Because we rarely choose the third option, God has to work overtime to rescue us from ourselves. (pages 78-80)

Activity: One of the best tools I have seen to help people understand their part in conflict is a Conflict Style Assessment piece by Jim Van Epperson. If you have never completed a conflict style self-assessment, let me suggest you contact the Heartland Church Network office and we will get you one—they are very inexpensive. It would also be a great tool to use with a church leadership team and as a marriage enrichment tool for husbands and wives.

B. The authors note, “If you have a problem, conflict is a good one to have. Why? Because conflict is a problem the Bible addresses very directly.” They go on to take an exegetical look at James 4:1-10 (one of many passages on conflict) and identify four critical questions that James answers about conflict.

1. Why do we fight with one another? (James 4:1-3) Our typical response to conflict is to point the finger at our opponent. We feel justified because the person often has done something annoying, frustrating, or even downright sinful! But James points out that even if someone has sinned against us, the reason we fight is because there is something wrong going on inside us! They go on to point out some of the things that can produce conflict in our lives:

- Comfort—I want, must have, and deserve comfort and you’d better not get in the way of me getting it! I fear work.
- Pleasure—I want, must have, and deserve pleasure and you’d better give it to me! I fear pain.
- Recognition—I want, must have, and deserve recognition or I will be devastated. I fear being overlooked.
- Power—I want, must have, and deserve power and you’d better do what I say! I fear being told what to do.
- Control—I want, must have, and deserve control and you will feel the brunt of my disappointment if you mess up my tidy little universe! I fear unpredictability.
- Acceptance—I want, must have, and deserve acceptance and you are responsible to give it to me. I fear rejection. (pages 80-83)

Q: Can you identify with any of these?

Q: Think about the last time you were in conflict with another person. What desire turned ugly as it became self-centered?

Q: As you reflect on your personal struggles, are there causal issues that you could add to the above list?

2. What has become more important to me than my relationship with God? (James 4:4) When we make something other than God first in our lives, James says we have become too friendly with the world and committed spiritual adultery. (pages 83-84)

Q: In our culture sports have become such an important part of many people’s lives that it has become more important than God. Is that an area where you struggle? If not, is there another area where you struggle?

3. What does God do with people who forsake Him for something else? (James 4:5-6) God is a jealous God who cares deeply about His relationship with us. Even when we stray and find ourselves in the arms of false lovers, He is roused to act on our behalf. God pursues us for our good. Why does He do that? Because He loves us more than we love ourselves! (pages 84-85)

4. Once we are rescued, what should we do? (James 4:7-10) Seeing God's redeeming love should lead us to grow in the joy of daily repentance and faith. Repentance and faith are the only dynamics that can change a war-maker into a peacemaker. James calls the person in conflict to engage in spiritual warfare. As you repent, you experience the purification of your heart, and your behavior begins to change as well. (pages 85-86)
- C. The chapter closes with a section entitled *Let's Get Practical* in which they give six suggestions for engaging in Godly conflict in the heat of the moment.
1. Understand that conflict is one way God works in our lives. He is always ready to make sweet lemonade out of the sour lemons we set at the foot of the cross.
  2. Identify what drives ungodly conflict in my life.
  3. Recognize my default strategy in conflict. See section A above.
  4. Engage in specific and intelligent spiritual warfare.
  5. Consider the other person.
  6. Make a plan to approach the person
    - a) Own whatever personal sin you have brought to the situation. But conversely don't let someone else try to dump their portion at your front door.
    - b) Name the problem. Do not attack the person, but identify the problem.
    - c) Explore possible solutions. Think creatively—there are always more than one or two options.
    - d) Implement the agreed-upon solution. Don't just provide lip service and don't agree to something you are not willing to do.
    - e) Evaluate your implementation.
    - f) If you get stuck and things don't improve, be willing to get outside help. The earlier the better! (pages 86-88)
- Q: Take time to evaluate the last couple of conflicted situations you encountered. If you gave yourself a grade based on the above suggested criteria, would you have passed—God doesn't grade on the curve.

## **Chapter 9: Forgiveness**

- A. The chapter opens with four all too familiar vignettes: a spouse discovers their significant other is having an affair, a college girl wrestles with the emotions of sexual abuse as a child, a couple experience an oft repeated spat, and a child is angrily told by dad to deal with his anger. The authors then state, "Each scenario presents the need and the opportunity to practice forgiveness. But so often in these situations, we choose to get even or pretend to ignore offenses...When we choose to practice true forgiveness, the relationship is not just brought back to where it was before the offense; it actually moves further down the road to maturity." (pages 92-93)

Activity: As you read and reflect on the topic of forgiveness, briefly describe below a personal "vignette" where you are struggling to forgive.

- B. They ask a series of questions that, to one degree or another, we live with on a day-to-day basis: “What does it look like to practice forgiveness? How can I forgive without acting like what they did is okay? Where will I find the desire to forgive or ask for forgiveness? What is forgiveness anyway?” They follow these questions with a reminder of the Lord’s Prayer petition that God would “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” and the statement that “I have had the opportunity to meet with hundreds of couples seeking help in their marriages. One of the most common problems is the giving and receiving of forgiveness. I have met couples who have been married for twenty years, yet neither one has ever truly admitted sin and asked for forgiveness. How can this be?”(pages 93-94)

Activity: Forget the “vignette” in activity A for just a minute and describe the process you and your spouse have developed for giving and asking forgiveness.

- C. The authors point out that the Bible does not leave us in the dark as it relates to forgiveness, and then they point to Matthew 18:21-25, Jesus parable of the unforgiving servant. Take a minute to re-read this passage. The balance of the chapter identifies five critical issues related to forgiveness: It involves canceling a debt; it is costly—but not forgiving is more costly; asking for and granting forgiveness; apologies and forgiveness; and forgiving by grace.

Under the section, *Forgiveness Involves Canceling a Debt*, they state that when you truly forgive you are making three promises:

1. You promise that you will not bring up the debt to use it as leverage.
2. You promise that you will not bring up the offense to others, and slander the person who sinned against you.
3. You promise not to dwell on the offense yourself. (pages 94-96)

Q: Keeping in mind the relationship you mentioned in point A, with which of the three do you struggle the most, and why?

- D. The heart of the chapter points to five specifics related to the topic *Forgiveness Is Costly, But Not Forgiving Is More Costly*.
1. A failure to forgive someone will change you—and not for the better.
  2. Forgiveness is an event AND a process. Forgiving someone is not just a past event. It’s something we must continue to practice, even when we are dealing with an offense we have already forgiven.
  3. Forgiveness is not forgetting. The authors state that there are at least two problems with this understanding of forgiveness. First, it is not realistic...Second, it is not biblical. And the authors provide a biblical basis for their position.
  4. Forgiveness has a vertical and a horizontal dimension. The authors note that the Bible states that un-forgiveness negatively impacts our vertical worship of God (Mark 11:25). Scripture therefore teaches an unconditional—not optional—command to forgive. However, they indicate that on the horizontal dimension, there is a distinction between reconciliation

which is conditional and requires the other person to repent and admit they have sinned against you, and the need to have an attitude of forgiveness toward them.

5. Forgiveness does not mean peace at all costs. They point to Matthew 18 as providing the following insights about life in the Kingdom of God: it requires humility to gently confront someone about their sin; it requires taking sin seriously; it expects us to go after lost and wayward people; and it gives us instruction on how to do it in verses 15-17. They conclude the section with the statement that, “Your attempt to love a habitually abusive, unrepentant person sometimes involves confrontation and possibly separation.” (pages 96-100)

Q: Again with the relationship mentioned in point A, where are you as it relates to each of these five points?

- E. They open the next section with the statement, “It is vital to know how to ask for and grant forgiveness.” To illustrate they return to one of the vignettes they used to open the chapter: the couple experiencing an oft repeated spat. They suggest the following dialogue: “‘Melissa, I am sorry for yelling at you. What I did was wrong. Will you forgive me?’ This time, Andy has been specific and named his sin. Melissa should not reply, ‘It’s okay.’ Why? Because it is not okay for someone to sin against another person! Instead, she has a decision to make: forgive or not forgive. If she understands her own forgiveness, she will say, ‘Thanks for saying that. Yes, I forgive you.’ If she has sinned against Andy, she may even add. ‘Will you forgive me for being sarcastic toward you?’” (pages 100-101)

Activity: As it relates to the relationship you mentioned in point A, write out your side of a dialogue that needs to take place with that person that fits the biblical pattern for asking and granting forgiveness.

- F. In the section entitled *Apologies and Forgiveness* they state, “There is a difference between an apology and asking for forgiveness. An apology is appropriate when you have done something by accident. For something that wasn’t an accident we can apologize and say I’m sorry, but we also need to name the sin, confess that it was wrong, and ask for forgiveness.” (page 101)

Q: As it relates to the relationship mentioned in point A, have you apologized for errors or omissions you have made? Do you need to take the additional step of confession and asking for forgiveness? What would that look like?

- G. The final section is entitled *Forgiving by Grace*. In it they acknowledge that “It is one thing to gain clarity on what forgiveness is and isn’t; it is quite another to actually practice it.” They return to the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant and remind us that the king who forgave much is a picture of the King of Kings who has forgiven each of us much. They suggest the following activity to help deepen our appreciation for what God has forgiven us.

Activity: Read I Peter 1:1-9 and then read it five more times! Read it every morning when you get up this week. Read it every night before you go to bed. As you read it think about yourself and the specific people you need to forgive or ask forgiveness from. As you ponder your true identity in Christ, do you recognize how blessed you are? (pages 101-104)

## Chapter 10: Hope

- A. The chapter opens with the reality that, “It is always harder to live in the middle of something than it is to live at the beginning or the end. When you are at the beginning you are filled with a sense of hope and potential. People at the end tend to be filled with relief, gratitude, and a sense of accomplishment. People in the middle usually discover that more work is involved than they ever expected. In the middle, thankfulness often degrades into complaint, and hope decays into resignation. It is hard to live in the middle of something, but that is exactly where all of our relationships take place.”

In the first section of this chapter they title *Love’s Difficulty*, they elaborate on life in the middle. “You and I never get to be married to a fully sanctified spouse. We will never be in a relationship with a completely mature friend. We will never live next to a neighbor utterly free of the need to grow and change. We will never have self-parenting children. We will never be near people who always think, desire, say, or do the right things.”

“Our job is to learn how to best live in the middle. So we live as broken people who are being repaired, among neighbors in the same condition.” (pages 106-109)

Q: How much hope can you squeeze from the reality that we live life in the middle?

Activity: Take a few minutes to think about one of your better relationships. What have been some of the more challenging experiences you have had? How did God help you move past those difficulties to establish an even stronger relationship?

Q: In some of your most challenging relationships, how could God intervene to change your heart towards them?

- B. The authors then state that we experience four things as we live out *Relationships in the Middle*:
1. Our relationships will never work according to our plan. God will take us where we have not planned to go in order to produce in us what we could not achieve on our own.
  2. Our relationships will never live up to our expectations. This side of eternity, none of us get to be with the person of our dreams and none of us are ready to be the person of someone else’s dreams!
  3. Our relationships will always grapple with some kind of difficulty. Building relationships is often like threading a needle while driving on a bumpy road!
  4. Our relationships will always need to improve. (pages 109-110)

Q: Which of the above realities gives you the most “heart burn” and why?

Q: Which of them gives you the most hope? Why?

- C. Under the title *Character for the Middle*, the author’s state, “It takes humility to live with a sinner in a world of difficulty. It takes gentleness to be part of what God is doing in someone’s life and not get in the way. It takes patience to deal with the sin and weakness of those around you. It takes perseverance to be part of change in a relationship because that change is most

often a process and rarely an event. It takes forgiveness to move beyond the times you have been mistreated by another. It takes forbearance to continue to love a person, even when you are being provoked. It is hard to respond in kindness when you are treated unkindly. It takes remarkable love to serve the good of the other person and not be distracted by daily needs. These are the equalities that characterize a healthy relationship, but our hearts are more often ruled by anger, fear, hurt, self-righteousness, bitterness, and a desire for some form of vengeance.” (pages 110-111)

Q: In a particularly challenging relationship you are having today, which set of virtues are you emulating: fruit of the flesh or the fruit of the Spirit?

Q: What are some things you can and will do to reflect more the fruit of the Spirit?

- D. *The Hardship of Relationships in the Middle* is the next section. In it the authors state, “Your relationships will take you beyond the boundaries of your normal strength. They will require what you do not seem to have, but that is exactly as God intended it. When you give up on yourself, you begin to rely on Him. Our relationships are not simply designed to make us interdependent with one another. They are intended to drive us to Him in humble personal dependency.” (pages 111-112)

Q: As you again think about a challenging relationship, and place where you currently are with that person on a continuum of one to ten between “living in your own strength” (flesh) and “relying completely on God” (spirit), where would you plot yourself and why?

- E. The closing section is called *Encouragement in the Middle* and begins with the challenge that “we tend to make two mistakes. First, we think encouragement is primarily about trying to make the person *feel* better, so we say things like, ‘Hang on, you can make it.’ These statements may offer temporary comfort, but they never lead to lasting change. The second thing we do is to try to encourage the person by *explaining* to him what the problem is and why it is happening.”

“Real encouragement is more about *sightedness* than it is about *explanation*. I am not talking about physical eyes, but the eyes of the heart. God has given us the capacity to ‘see’ unseen spiritual realities that are as real and vital as any physical thing we can see or touch. Encouragement is not just about making people feel and think better; it’s about stimulating spiritual imagination. Encouragement gives struggling people the eyes to see an unseen Christ. How do we encourage one another in the middle of relational hardship? By giving each other eyes to see three things: *Christ’s presence, Christ’s promises, and our potential in Christ*” The chapter closes with the following questions: (pages 112-115)

Q: How committed are you to helping the person near you see Christ?

Q: Are you willing and ready to encourage?

Q: What would it look like for you to do this?

## Chapter 11: Burdens

A. The chapter focuses on Jesus' willingness to be a servant leader and opens with two contrasting Bible passages: James' and John's request to have favored positions in Jesus' kingdom (Mark 10:35-45), and Jesus washing of the disciples' feet (John 13:1-17). They ask, "When you think about your relationships, how many of them ultimately revolve around making sure your concerns are heard and your self-defined 'needs' are met? Start with those you love the most. I am married and have four children, and most of the time I am committed to thinking about how they can make my life more fulfilling. I know this is true because of how easily I get irritated when I have to give up personal comfort to serve them. This is with people I say I love; I haven't even begun to think about the difficult people. And let's not even bring up our enemies!"

Q: How often do you see this attitude in yourself? Before you can become a servant, you have to see how much of a servant we aren't! (pages 117-121)

B. The heart of the chapter focuses on Jesus' servant heart and makes the following three statements:

1. *Circumstances Don't Determine Whether You Serve*—When we encounter Jesus in John 13, His circumstances are horrible. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to die on the cross for self-centered sinners.
2. *Someone's Worthiness Does Not Determine Whether You Serve*—As Jesus' eyes scanned the room, He saw Judas who would soon betray Him; Peter who would soon deny Him; and the other ten disciples who would use the feet He was washing to run for cover when Jesus needed them the most.
3. *Your Position Doesn't Determine Whether You Serve*—Remember, John records in the opening verse of chapter 13 that Jesus knew exactly who He was.

Q: When did you serve this past week when the world would say you should have been served? Describe the circumstances. (pages 121-124)

C. The authors state, "If you were comfortable when you started reading this chapter, you should be very disturbed now!" They include several probing questions:

Q: Are you seeing how pervasive your self-centeredness is in your relationships?

Q: When was the last time you were called to serve someone?

Q: What moved you in that person's direction? Was it remembering how great you are and how much this person needed to be touched by your greatness?

Q: When was the last time you served someone when you knew no one would ever see you doing it? (pages 124-127)



- D. The chapter closes by mentioning five *one another* passages and their implications:
1. *Be devoted to one another*—This means that we treat other people like they are part of our family, with the kind of mutual love that exists between parents, children, and siblings.
  2. *Honor one another*—Honoring someone means that you treat them seriously. You treat them as someone of value.
  3. *Accept one another*—Whom do you tend to exclude? What non-essential, secondary convictions do you allow to get between you and another Christian? In what ways do you need to accept others? Who needs your acceptance right now?
  4. *Bear one another's burdens*—Where do you need to shoulder someone else's burden? How will that change the way you use your time and money, talents, possessions, and reputations? What other resources do you have that can be used to ease the burden?
  5. *Bear with one another*—This means you are patient with others when you would be tempted and it would be very easy to get irritated? What weaknesses and idiosyncrasies do you find hard to tolerate in others? (pages 127-130)

## Chapter 12: Mercy

- A. The chapter opens with James 2:1-13 and focuses on the closing words of that passage “Mercy triumphs over judgment!” The authors then include a personal experience of opening their home to an “immature, self-centered, rebellious, rude, illogical, messy, and nosy” teenager, and how challenging it was. Further describing her they stated, “She had a very small universe, but she was at its center. She lived as if it really was ‘all about her.’” Following further elaboration on the scripture and the teenager, they state, “Mercy forces us all to face the fact that we need it too. None of us has the spiritual upper hand. Each of us lives with weakness and the results of our own poor choices.” (pages 132-135)

Q: What are some of your personal traits that can make life difficult for others? If you have any trouble finding a long list, and if you're married, just ask your spouse. If you're not married, just ask a close friend to be very honest with you.

- B. Under a section entitled *What is Mercy Anyway* the authors give us two definitions of mercy:
1. Mercy is the kind, sympathetic, and forgiving treatment of others that works to relieve their distress and cancel their debt. Or...
  2. Mercy is compassion combined with forbearance and action.

They elaborate on the second definition by defining the following qualities:

- Compassion—seeing beyond one's own difficulties to care about the difficulties of others.
- Forgiveness—pardoning a person for an offense without treating them like a criminal or harboring resentment.
- Forbearance—patience under provocation. (pages 135-136)

Activity: Think of an individual in your life that needs your mercy. Can you commit to living alongside them in this broken world, even though you will suffer with them, for them, and because of them?

- C. The balance of the chapter identifies ten aspects of extending mercy to others.
1. *Mercy means you expect suffering in your relationships and are willing to endure it*—Do your relationships demonstrate a willingness to suffer for another’s sake?
  2. *Mercy means you are willing to live with the poor*—poverty is not always economic. A person can be difficult to live with because they are spiritually or socially poor. Do your attitudes and responses change when you discover that a person is ‘poor’ in some way?
  3. *Mercy means you resist the temptation to favoritism*—Are there relationships in which you have indulged in favoritism?
  4. *Mercy means you are committed to persevere in hardship*—In your relationships, where are you struggling with God’s call to persevere?
  5. *Mercy rejects a ‘personal happiness’ agenda*—Where is God calling you to leave what is comfortable so that you can share what He has given you with another?
  6. *Mercy means you live with a commitment to forgive*—Are there people in your life you are struggling to forgive?
  7. *Mercy means you overlook minor offenses*—Where have you allowed yourself to be distracted and irritated by the minor offenses of others?
  8. *Mercy does not compromise what is morally right and true*—Are there places where you have confused compromise with mercy?
  9. *A commitment to mercy will reveal the treasures of your heart*—Do your desires get in the way of offering mercy to others?
  10. *Giving mercy always demands mercy*—When you extend mercy, you will begin to see how selfish, impatient, unforgiving, and inconsistent you can be. Mercy will show you how much your own heart still needs the continuing work of the Redeemer. It will drive you to the end of yourself and to the grace of your merciful Savior. And that is a very good thing! (pages 137-140)

### **Chapter 13: Time and Money**

A. If you want to discover what you treasure, look at your schedule and checkbook. How you relate to time and money says a lot about your relationship with God. It also speaks volumes about how you view other people. The chapter points to several Bible passages that speak to proper stewardship of time, money, and relationships (people). The first, Ephesians 4:25-32, touches on money and people. The authors point to verse 28, “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.” And then state, “You haven’t stopped being a thief until a part of your money goes to help people besides yourself.” (pages 142-143).

Q: The concepts of being a servant leader and of a willingness to be self-sacrificing are commonly listed among Christian virtues. But what do you think of the reality that you are still a thief until a part of your money goes to help people besides yourself?

B. Under a section entitled *Increasing Wealth, Declining Giving*, the authors point out that the rise in American affluence has been accompanied by a percentage decline in charitable giving. Later in the chapter they state that “Statistics show that those who make \$10,000 or less tend to give away 5.5% of their income, while those who make \$100,000 or more give only 2.9%.” (pages 144 & 147)

Q: Looking back at your own life, if your income has increased, did your giving also increase proportionately?

- C. The next passage they included is II Corinthians 8:1-15 in which Paul provides two clear examples of how to give. The first is that of the churches in Macedonia. They point to seven aspects of their giving:
1. *Their giving encouraged unity*—the Macedonians were Gentiles, and they owed their new spiritual life to Jewish Christians and their giving reflected a desire to be seen as one body.
  2. *Their giving was a supernatural work of the Spirit*—Paul stated in verse one that their giving was a sign of God’s work in them.
  3. *Their giving was surprising*—In the midst of their own poverty and persecution, they exhibited generosity and joy.
  4. *Their giving was sacrificial*—in verse three Paul states they gave “far more than they could afford.”
  5. *Their giving was spontaneous*—verses 4-5 tell us that they were “pleading for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians in Jerusalem.
  6. *Their giving was an act of submission*—they were not submitting to Paul, nor their Christian brethren in Jerusalem, but to God.
  7. *Their giving was a spiritual barometer*—in verse 12 Paul wrote, “The heart regulates the hands.”

The second example Paul gave in II Corinthians 8 was that of Jesus. In verse nine Paul wrote, “You are familiar with the generosity of our Master, Jesus Christ. Rich as He was, He gave it all away for us—in one stroke he became poor and we became rich.” (pages 146-149)

Q: Look at your relationship to money. What does it tell you about your relationship to God?

Q: What does it reveal about what you think is most important in life? In other words, how much does your personal “kingdom” of pleasure, comfort, security, and status have a hold on you?

- D. They move next to discuss the issue of time and people, and they ask, “What does your use of time say about your attitude toward God and others?” Here they refer to Ephesians 5:15-21 which includes Paul’s statement, “Be very careful how you live, making the most of every opportunity.” The writers point to the following four teachings about redeeming our time:
1. *It is not calling you to frenetic activity*—the call is not so much about specific activities as it is about a lifestyle committed to God’s purposes, encompassing all the details of our daily lives.
  2. *It means that you see your life in light of your various callings*—Our tendency is to live with an attitude of getting through this season of life. They suggest God wants us to see the daily struggles of everyday life as critical moments for redemptive activity.
  3. *It means that you are to seize the little moments of life*—much of our life is lived in the mundane. Imagine if instead of acting mundane what would happen if we began to take advantage of those opportunities.

4. *You must see the context in which these things take place*—we live in a spiritual war zone. Paul wrote, “because the days are evil,” we need to wake up! (pages 149-151)

Q: Which of these four realities is the Holy Spirit pointing out to you today? What do you need to change in that specific area of your life?

## Chapter 14: Provision

- A. This chapter opens by setting up another of their great vignettes—a real strength of the book are the real-to-life sketches they include. This one is of a young couple who are struggling with each other and with life is used throughout the chapter. They point out that for all of us there is a “reality” we see which becomes the reality that we live by. A way that I have personally phrased this point is that “our perception is our reality, but our reality is not always true.” There is a world that Kara (wife in the vignette) sees and believes to be true, and then there is the world that a close friend of hers sees as she begins to listen to Kara’s woes. As the friend was introduced to Kara’s world, she was able to see things that Kara could not see. Everywhere she (the friend) looked she saw the evidence of God’s redeeming grace at work. She saw Kara’s love for her husband and children. Though their finances were tight, she saw God’s obvious provision. Where Kara saw only failure, her friend saw God’s ability to use those struggles to bring this couple to a new place in their lives.” (pages 154-156)

Activity: With the benefit of hind sight, describe a time in your life when you were where Kara was—blinded to the activities of God by difficulties and discouragement.

Now take a few minutes and reflect on a recent “counseling” experience you have had where you were able to help someone else see the “workings of God” in the midst of their difficulties.

- B. Under the title of *Explanation: Is It Enough?* the authors state, “In the midst of trying circumstances, our tendency is to search for an explanation that does three things:
1. Helps us understand what is going on.
  2. Points us to where we should be going.
  3. Tells us how to get there.

The authors suggest that explanations alone will only convince us that our problems are deeper than we thought, the goals farther away, and that our resources are inadequate. (pages 156-157)

Q: Reflect back on the two situations that came to mind in the activity section of point A above, how effective were “explanations” alone in helping you and the other person through the challenges?

- C. The writers shift to *Imagination: The Rest of the Story* as the more critical step in moving past difficult circumstances. They write, “Imagination is not the ability to dream up things that aren’t real; it is the ability to see what is real but often unseen.” They state, “Imagination gives us a deeper sense of two unseen realities: (1) our identity, the unseen realities of who God says

we are; and (2) Gods resources, the unseen realities of His presence with us and provision for us.”

Q: What is your reaction to the use of the word “imagination” as they have defined it?

Q: From your personal experiences, in the middle of times of difficulty how easy was it to see all of the options/solutions that God had set in front of you?

- D. They then elaborate on each of the two “unseen realities.” First, under *Identity: Who AM I?* they write, “The Bible says that two fundamental things characterize those who are in Christ. First, there has been a radical change in the core of our being.” The Bible says that our hearts of stone have been replaced by hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). And Paul says we are a new creation in Christ (II Corinthians 5:17).

Secondly, “The Bible also stirs our imagination by explaining our connection to God as one of His children.” Our new standing is legal (we have been adopted into the family of God) and personal (we are called a child of the King and a friend of God). (pages 158-160)

Activity: Stop and reflect on where you are with God. Apart from a personal saving relationship through Jesus Christ, you still have a heart of stone and you are not a new creation. Apart from repentance, remorse, and rejection of your own “good works” as a way of getting right with God there is no adoption and you are not a friend of God. However, if you have in simple child-like faith accepted God’s realities as true, then any and every time there are difficulties (and they come pretty regularly) open your imagination to all that God can and will do for you.

- E. In the section labeled *God’s Presence and Provision* they write, “When struggles remain and life does not change overnight, it is easy for confusion and helplessness to settle in. They lead you to think that the struggles of your life are unique, that no one understands, and that you are all alone. When you are in this place of neediness and discouragement, you want answers and strategies [NOW!], but God gives us something better. He gives us Himself. He is our wisdom. He is our strength. He is our forgiveness. He is our Father.” And as a professing believer God is not just near us or with us, but He is in us through His Holy Spirit.

The next section, *What is God Doing in My Life?* continues the theme of God’s presence and provision by pointing to Psalm 121 and Romans 8:28-39. They note, “How radically these verses confront our feeble imaginations! When we are in trouble, our tendency is to think that God is nowhere to be found and we must fix things ourselves. When our vision of reality is this small, our attempts to fix things often make the trouble more troubling. We either want to fix the wrong things or fix the right things in the wrong way.”

They summarize these sections by stating, “In short, we are called to help each other see the unseen reality of our active, present, and personal God. God’s work is driven by an agenda so much grander than simply making our lives better. He wants to remake us into His likeness. (pages 160-164)

Q: A personal reality is that as I reflect back on the most difficult and challenging times of my life, I can now see God's hand more clearly at work than I can as I look at those times when I was on "auto pilot"—with me as the pilot. Have you experienced this reality as well? If so, take a few minutes to elaborate on key insights that you gleaned from those difficult days.

## Chapter 15: Moving Out

A. The closing chapter is a basic exhortation to live out the Christian life as if we were "one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread." They open the chapter by stating, "We all live with, and are party to, the damage sin engenders. What makes the Bible so compelling is that it understands this. The drama of Scripture is our drama. It rings true to life no matter what degree of brokenness we have experienced." But on the other side of the coin, Scripture also points to a better way. The authors wrote, "The really stunning thing about our world is not the overwhelming amount of brokenness, but the presence of any good! Because of God's presence, you have experienced joy in relationships. Conflicts actually get resolved. A tough conversation turns out positively. Someone reached out to you in a time of struggle. You have been granted forgiveness. Real love has been expressed and shared. You have been served and have been willing to serve. A casual relationship has matured into a deep friendship. People have overlooked your weaknesses and applauded your strengths. People have learned to be honest without being mean. (pages 168-169)

Activity: As I wrote this section, my daily devotional reading is in the Psalms. In it we find writers who both struggled with deep and life threatening difficulties and who expressed mountain top exuberance. One passage that meant a lot to me in the midst of my most recent struggles was Psalm 139:23-24. "Search me and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. And see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." List some of the verses that God has used to help you through difficult days.

B. In the heart of the chapter, they use another vignette to describe what it can look like when caring Christians risk building a relationship with other deeply broken people. One evening one young couple's conflict (Erin and Ben's) spilled out into the stairwell of their apartment complex. Another couple overheard the argument and asked if they could help. As a result of this simple act of kindness, Erin began to meet with the wife and Ben started a friendship with the husband. The caring couple used the weapons of their warfare (humility, honesty, hope, grace, and courage) to demonstrate life in the Kingdom of God.

Using the Kingdom theme, they then contrasted what the Pharisees' understanding was of the Kingdom of God with what Jesus taught about the Kingdom. It is not an earthly, political kingdom but it is something that dwells within a true believer (Luke 17:20-21). The balance of the chapter expands on Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:13-16 about believers being salt and light. (pages 169-173)

Q: Describe the last time you "took a risk" and tried to build a relational bridge into the life of someone who was struggling.

Q: If that one didn't turn out well, think back to a time when the spiritual return on investment was good, and describe that experience.

- C. They discuss the call to be salt under the title *Being Salt: Moving Out*. "The image of salt challenges isolationism because salt is only effective as a retardant to decay when it is in close contact with the decaying substance. The call of the kingdom is a call into the world, never away from it. Jesus was unequivocal when He said in John 17:15, 'My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.'"

But the image of salt also highlights the importance of our character. Salt is only effective if it is truly salty! They ask, "What ministry opportunities exist for you with the people God has put in your path? And then they prime the pump with the following suggestions in question form:

Q: Is there a struggling family in your neighborhood?

Q: Is there a single parent at your child's school?

Q: Is there someone in your church who is lonely and discouraged?

Q: Is there a teenager who needs to see how a family functions?

Q: Are there relationships you can pursue through your children's extracurricular activities?

Q: Where are the needs for service, mercy, and help in your community?

Q: Has God put an elderly person in your life who needs companionship?

Q: Where are the poor in your community? How can you be a part of their lives? (pages 173-174)

- D. Then under the title *Being Light: Welcoming In*, they write, "Light involves welcoming people in so that they can see that the kingdom has come. Our relationships are meant to be beacons in a dark world, and we are called to welcome people into the light." Pointing to Ephesians 5:11f, they note that in verse 15, Paul wrote, "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil." Then they challenge us with this statement: "Our lives and relationships in Christ are to be more compelling than the temporary pleasures of sin."

They ask, "What opportunities do you have to invite others into the light so that they can see the kingdom?" And again, they include in question form a number of suggestions. (Pages 174-176)

Q: Does your child have a friend who may benefit from time in your home?

Q: Is there a coworker you can invite for dinner and a movie with your friends?

Q: Do you know an elderly person (or an international student) who would enjoy the love of a family during the holidays?

Q: Is there someone who is burdened or in crisis and in need of a retreat?

Q: Is there another family who would enjoy time with your family?

Q: Do you know a younger couple who could be mentored by an older couple?

Q: If you are single, is there a family with young children who would benefit from your help? How might this bless you as well?

- E. The closing section of the book is labeled *Ministry Is Worship*. The authors state, “Whenever you serve other people, you are not just serving them. You are serving the King—and that is worship. They close the book with Matthew 25:34-40 which concludes with the King’s reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

Activity: Using the lists in section C and D above as a source for good ideas, describe at least one “out of your comfort zone” opportunity you are going to take in the weeks ahead to minister to one of the “least among us.”