

Joke: As I get older I would like to believe that I get a bit wiser as well. I'm now 60 years old and over those years I've learned a lesson or two. Here's one. . .

Last week I went to a fast food drive-thru and apparently I was taking a little to long to order. Now I admit I didn't decide what I wanted before I got to the order screen, but this woman behind me thought I was taking way to long and began to honk her horn almost not stop.

I looked in my rear view mirror and she was flashing me a finger and I can't read lips all that well but see was mouthing things I recognized just fine and it wasn't very pleasant. It was down right ugly.

But in spite of that after I ordered I pulled up to the first window and decided to pay for her meal as well as mine.

Apparently, the cashier told her what I did because when she pulled up to the window to pay she smiled, waved, and mouthed thank you, thank you. Honestly, maybe she was a little embarrassed that I had repaid her rudeness with kindness.

As I got to the second window I showed the server both receipts and I took her food too.

Now to be fair, as I pulled away I waved back. But I did cause her to have to go to the back of the line and start the process all over.

Lesson to this woman and anyone else who thinks like her. Don't blow your horn at old people we've been around a long time.

Week 2: Better Relationships

Our relationships are a good indicator of the trajectory of our lives. The people that we spend most of our time with have an incredible influence on who we become. To become better, we may need to make better choices concerning the “whom” we spend our time “with”.

I believe your best opportunity for spiritual growth does not happen when we are by ourselves, but when we are in relationship with one another. Truth is we were created for community.

Last week we began a sermon series called Better. And I am convinced that living a life with Jesus is the best way to live, and I also believe that when we submit to Him, our lives are better.

As we started this series, we looked at the impact God can have in our lives when we begin the new year with better priorities. When we put God first, the rest of our lives fall into order. If we get this backward, the most important things in our lives suffer.

And let me just say this before I share what I want to talk about today if you haven't already picked up on it. Jesus came so that we can come into right relationship with the Father as sons and daughters. This has to be a personal choice God doesn't have

any grandkids. You can't get to Heaven on the backs of your mom or dad. It is a personal relationship with Jesus who died for you that gets you to the destiny I hope you desire.

Today we will discover that the people we surround ourselves with have far reaching effects on who we are. Sometimes it is important for us to focus on having better relationships and surrounding ourselves with others who want to be better. Truth is church sometimes others can hold you back from what God has purposed in your life and where He is trying to take you to.

In Dale Carnegie's book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, we are given some of the most basic, yet effective advice for developing meaningful relationships. He says: 1. Become genuinely interested in other people. People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. 2. Smile. If you want to draw others to you, light up your face with a smile. 3. Remember names. A person's name is the sweetest and most important sound to that person. 4. Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves. 5. Talk in terms of the other person's interests. Treat others the way they want to be treated.

And I must admit I have difficulty with number 3. (share story about guy calling out my name in Saugatuck and I still have no clue who it is).

As I already mentioned you and I were created for relationships. We were designed to live our best lives when we do it in the context of community. The problem is that we don't always choose the right people to surround ourselves with. Often, we can do better.

The Bible gives us some practical wisdom for living in healthy community with one another.

Proverbs 12:26 (NIV): The righteous choose their friends carefully, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.

The righteous choose their friends carefully. That means rather than leaving our closest relationships to chance, we make a concerted effort to surround ourselves with people who are carefully chosen.

The righteous know the kind of person they want to be and choose to surround themselves with people who help them achieve those goals. The righteous look for people who make them better versions of themselves. The righteous seek out people who love God with their whole hearts and live it out each day.

Truth is church some people don't have our best interest in mind. Some people don't live based upon a desire to please God. Some people don't make us better, some can make us bitter. I'll even go so far as to say this even in the Body of Christ there are some that will get jealous if it even appears like God has given you something He hasn't given them. (Gift, ministry, whatever). Some have a hard time with you getting blessed.

The differences between positive relationships and negative ones can be compared to the difference between graffiti and an art gallery. Graffiti is haphazard. It is messy. It is unpredictable. An art

gallery is different. Graffiti is chaotic, but an art gallery is curated. It is strategic. It is thought through.

The art behind building relationships can be seen in much the same way. If we leave our closest connections to accidental encounters, we may find ourselves being led to places we never wanted to go and becoming people we never intended to be.

When we look at the life of Jesus, we see the way to develop better relationships. Jesus certainly spent time with a lot of people. We will call them the crowd.

But He also had a group of 12 disciples that He did most of His life with. Even inside of those 12, he had 3 even closer relationships in Peter, James, and John where He really invested His time and energy.

Jesus did not leave his friendships to chance; He chose them wisely. We should do the same. Now be honest for a minute as well, He called some that you and I would have overlooked. They all weren't the most elite or educated, but He say something in them that He wanted to show them about themselves.

Acts 4:13 (NIV): When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

Listen when you spend time with Jesus others should be able to take notice of that fact.

The only way we can avoid relationships by chance and develop friendships by choice is by looking for characteristics in others that look like Jesus and encourage us toward Him.

The apostle Paul writes about this in his letter to the early church in Corinth. And Paul puts this into his letter to show us some of the characteristics we need to see in who we consider to be our closest of friends.

1 Corinthians 13:4–7 (NIV): Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Paul is outlining what true relationships, built on the love of God, look like in our lives. I don't know about you but I want to connect with people who are patient and kind. I want to trust people who are not self-seeking or proud. I want to have friendships that always protect one another and persevere through difficult times.

A good friend with these characteristics makes us feel safe, loved, and supported. Some of the greatest friendships I have had in my life have been because they fit this passage so well. Some of them were born out of adversity and struggle.

Jackie Robinson was the first black athlete to play major league baseball. Breaking baseball's color barrier, he faced jeering crowds

in every stadium that he competed in. While playing one day in his home stadium in Brooklyn, New York, he committed an error on the field. The fans began to ridicule him. He stood at second base, humiliated, while the fans heckled him. It was at the height of the tension, when he felt most alone, that suddenly, shortstop Pee Wee Reese came over and stood next to him. He put his arm around Jackie Robinson and faced the crowd. The fans grew silent. Robinson later said that arm around his shoulder saved his career.

There's an example in the Scriptures as well. . .watch this

Exodus 17:8–15 (NIV): The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. 9 Moses said to Joshua, “Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands.” 10 So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. 11 As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. 12 When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset. 13 So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword. 14 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven.” 15 Moses built an altar and called it The Lord is my Banner.

Some of us this morning need to have someone like Pee Wee Reese in our life. Someone who is willing to come and stand next to

us when no one else will. Someone who will face down the jeering crowds, so we don't have to do it alone.

Some of us need Aaron and Hur's in our life's. Someone that wants the best for us and is willing to hold us up when it seems like you can no longer hold yourself up.

Do you have someone who embodies the patience, kindness, humility, love, truth, and joy that are mentioned in 1 Corinthians?

If not, begin this new year by doing everything in your power to find folks who do. That way, when life throws you the difficult circumstances that often come, like losing a job, marriage struggles, addiction, or a sinful temptation, you don't have to go it alone.

As important as it is for us to be on the lookout for Godly friendships, there is also a very important aspect to better relationships that often goes overlooked. . .and that is what kind of friend am I?

The truth is that in order for us to have better relationships, we must also be someone people might want to develop a relationship with. We must live with a sober self-assessment and be able to answer honestly if we are the kind of people God wants us to be.

If you were to be honest, what kind of friend are you? Are you trustworthy? Are you kind? Are you forgiving? Do you have other's best interests in mind? Paul writes about this need for an others focused life in the book of Romans.

Romans 12:10 (NIV): Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.

What Paul is doing here is giving instruction for individuals to live in meaningful relationships with one another. Rather than just expect that everyone else would cater to my needs and desires, I make a conscious effort to be devoted to others in love.

This word for love that Paul uses is the word Philadelphia. Sounds familiar right? What is that city known as? The city of brotherly love.

Paul is inviting us to love others as brothers and sisters in Christ. There is a deep connection that is made as a part of God's family. Then he says we ought to honor one another above ourselves.

Without putting other people first and honoring them by the way that we treat them, there is no hope of building better relationships that are not, somehow, one sided.

There was a bit of practical wisdom offered by an article in Daily Walk in 1993. And all though the writing is a bit dated, I think you would agree its advice is not. It said this, "How To Be Miserable." Like who of you woke up this morning saying today I going to make a conscious effort to be miserable? It went on to say, "Think about yourself. Talk about yourself. Use "I" as often as possible. Mirror yourself continually in the opinion of others. Listen greedily to what people say about you. Expect to be appreciated. Be suspicious. Be jealous and envious. Be sensitive to slights. Never forgive a criticism. Trust nobody but yourself. Insist on consideration and respect. Demand agreement with your own views on everything.

Sulk if people are not grateful to you for favors shown them. Never forget a service you have rendered. Shirk your duties if you can. Do as little as possible for others."

Doing that will certainly make you miserable. I mean I know people who get bothered that they don't get enough likes on Facebook. Not enough followers.

Let's take the opposite route and be a person focused on others more than yourself. Maybe a better why to say it is to be the type of friend you want to have.

Once again, Jesus is our greatest example for building better relationships. He was the standard for living a life of humility and service.

Through His life, death, and resurrection, He demonstrated how to love others well. So, in this new year, make a commitment to surround yourself with people who push you toward Jesus.

Pay close attention to the kinds of fruit that your closest friends demonstrate. Pay even closer attention to your own fruit to make sure you are the kind of person who would encourage and support people who enter a relationship with you.

Now before I close out today it is imperative that I make this point. I am by know means saying that you shouldn't have friends that do not attend church, don't love God, or that don't ascribe to your moral standards.

Jesus met with people, talked with people, loved on people that nobody else would. The discarded in society. And he always has time for them. But He never allowed them to influence His mission.

So love all. But when it comes to the closest in your circle make sure they are pushing you closer and closer to Jesus.

It is always wise to take a step back this time of year and reevaluate. And maybe just maybe better relationships are exactly what you need.

1 Corinthians 15:33 (NIV): Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character."