

Lesson 6 Stewarding Relationships

Overview

The Lord sends us into relationships as his ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20). Like a country ambassador or a brand ambassador, we are to embody the identity of that which we represent. Each relationship is an opportunity to love, yet we soon see that we fall short in representing Christ. It would be far easier to be an ambassador representing the femininity of a perfume or the fitness vibe of an athletic shoe than to represent the love level of the Lord of Lords. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit continually transforms us. Though we are weak, he is strong. If relationships are the training ground for learning to love, the currency of relationships, as Jesus shows us, is love. In stewarding relationships, we seek to invest, grow, and maximize love as love grows the kingdom. Teach us, Lord, to love you with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Objectives

Having received the responsibility to care for relationships, learners will

- Love God
- Love people
- Spread the gospel

Stewarding Relationships

- **Relationship with God**

To love God is to give time to being still with him, fully focused on his presence, learning from the example and teaching of Christ. In so investing love, we become aware of the constant, abiding love of God. As we become attentive to God indwelling, we take on the likeness of Christ increasingly each day; finding him here within, we bring him to others. By showing up for meditation on the ways of God, we invite the Spirit to stoke the morning embers, reigniting the flame within so we may shine as a light for others on the path to Jesus. "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14).

Isn't it enough to just think about God while driving to work or hanging out with friends? Jesus rose early in the morning to go to a solitary place to pray (Mark 1:35). If Jesus needed this habit, so, likewise, do we. When we show up for a pre-set regular appointment with God, we grow in faith, and find we are watching for the presence of God throughout the day. We get better at tuning in to what is constant, the Lord's presence, his bids for attention in the relationship.

Meditate on scripture. Sit peacefully in the presence of God's love. Note what God wants you to do with what you are receiving. Act. Notice transformation. Trust during the adventure of obeying. Notice where your light is showing another person the way.

Apply

What do you believe God experiences when you show up to be focused on him, ready to learn his ways, and investing love in the relationship?

Who in your life has embodied the identity of Christ, being an excellent ambassador? How did the Lord transform them into such a bright light to the world?

Set reminders. Watch faith grow as, expecting to be transformed, you show up for appointments with God this week and step into each day's adventure.

- **Relationship with Self**

Love flows from love. When one loves the self, one compassionately treats others with loving care. God is a well of loving kindness into which we extend our vessels, being continually filled. From the overflow of the God-filled heart, we speak and act toward others and the self. God has entrusted the self to us as a temple for his indwelling (1 Corinthians 3:16). We take good care of ourselves as his home.

Before welcoming the Spirit of God to live here, the self primarily focused on pleasing the self. Love was reserved for a small circle. Baptism saw the move-in of the Holy Spirit. Trusting in Jesus brought renovations.

The new self is transformed out of self-centeredness into being Christ-centric. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3 ESV). Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). Giving is more blessed because our giving kills our self-centeredness, takes away the love of money, and fuels our mission to help those in need. Because we have been given everything we need in Christ, we don't need to expect anything in return while giving (Matthew 6:9-13, 19-34; Luke 12:22-34). We become happy, that is, blessed when we pick up our cross and deny ourselves, as Jesus taught in Luke 9:23. In so giving, we receive a spiritual downpour of more than our laps can contain, more than we could ask or imagine (Luke 6:38, Ephesians 3:20). To live is Christ, to die is gain (Philippians 1:21). "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Apply

What is changing in your spiritual home for God, his temple, as renovations take you from self-centered to Christ-centric? What specific messy room of the self do you invite God to redo now?

- **Relationships with Christian Family**

Who has been entrusted to you as a special relationship in the spiritual family? While on the cross, "When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 'Dear woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on, this disciple took her into his home" (John 19:25-27). How they must have loved each other in the days and years ahead. John's love must have soothed Mary's pierced heart in which every word about and from Jesus had been treasured up. Imagine the conversations as they shared homelife together. Surely Mary's motherly love and reassurances are woven into the writings of John.

Each year, around February 14th, Gary and Linda Varner invite a houseful of senior church women who are without a spouse to their place for a lovefest of extravagant Valentine pampering. Don't you know Jesus loves that. Through Gary and Linda, his beloved darlings experience his love for them. One of the kindest things we can do for Jesus is to lovingly care for his bride.

The church becomes one body, kneaded and baked as one loaf of bread (1 Corinthians 10:17). Each person enters into congregational life that lives out the truths of Jesus' teaching, his values, and principles. God invites us to encourage one another, love one another deeply from the heart, and to pray for one another. Perhaps praying for each other is the most powerful thing we do together. Prayer moves mountains. United, we can help move them for each other.

Sometimes, though, in our worst churchlife scenarios, togetherness feels like running a three legged race. One of our legs is annoyingly strapped to the leg of a sibling who seems all too different from us. Sure that we could coolly strut to the finish line alone, instead we are inching along clumsily together, dragging that connected leg with all our angry might. Can't a Christian just go off and do their own thing? Does it really matter if we go to church gatherings if we are, after all, already baptized believers? Why does remaining connected with the body matter? What was God thinking?

When we persist and remain curious, God shows us how to love like he loves: it turns out that building a community is formative to the individuals. If ever you feel

like skipping a church gathering, remember the centerpiece of worship, the communion: Christ's body broken for us, his blood shed for us. Go to the gathering for the lesson in learning to love; take on the quest to become better at loving the person who is challenging. Over time and with prayer, notice growth in feeling compassion for a person who once provoked only avoidance and irritation. Instead of reacting when someone says the worst thing that could be said, pause and respond gently and honestly, doing so in love.

Jesus sees his bride as radiant. Be with people who desire to live out the values, principles, and teachings of Christ. Coming to the gatherings of church is a commitment that accompanies the decision to become a Christian. Just like we marry into a whole family when we commit to a spouse, so also we marry into a whole family when we commit to Jesus. The church is where one learns to love as Jesus loves.

Apply

How have you been saying yes to Jesus' invitation to love his bride fully?

How do the word pictures of one loaf or one body or one bride help you to steward your relationships with people in the church?

How might you increase your transparency and availability to a specific believer? Is there a person the Lord would like you to mentor in the faith? Who has he placed in your life to be your Christian mentor?

Notice people in church life who are or could be to you as Mary was to John or as John was to Mary if you welcome that. This week, be intentional about giving and receiving love. Receive relationships from the Lord. See with whom God has entrusted you.

- **Relationship with Neighbors**

Going out into the earth-neighborhood, we encounter divine appointments, person by person. Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). We ask God to grow the kingdom as, in relationships with neighbors, we invest the love he continually gives us.

We help those who are vulnerable. Jesus said, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these hungry, thirsty, without-shelter, naked, sick, or in-prison siblings of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:31-40). Paul specifically states that we are to work hard to help the weak, most likely referring to the poor or those in need of assistance to care for themselves. As Paul is speaking, he is not simply seeking

encouragement and prayer for the poor but is calling the church to give financially to those who are in need. The New Testament calls for us to give to both the family of faith and outsiders (Galatians 6:10). Our words to the poor and weak—whether inside or outside the church—are deemed worthless, if no practical action is taken to help them (James 2:14-17). Therefore, when we consider what Jesus meant when He said, “It is more blessed to give,” our giving must not only be in the spiritual and emotional area, but also in practical areas, with finances and resources. God calls all people to steward their resources wisely for the sake of the gospel, and to help the poor, weak, widowed, and orphaned (1 Peter 4:10-11, James 1:27, Proverbs 19:17).

Apply

In his neighborly-good Samaritan story, Jesus challenges hearers to invest in relationships, to cross cultures, break rules, give money, and stay invested. Read the story as you picture a modern-day version; see Luke 10:29–37. Take a few minutes and jot down your description of a modern day Good Samaritan story. Share the specific characters of your story with the class. Who acts as the robbers did? Who looks at the hurt person as the priest and Levite did? Who are the good stewards, the merciful Samaritan and professional innkeeper, being faithful in what was entrusted to them?

Supplemental Optional Study of Special Relationships

- **Marriage**

Consider marriage as a gospel-spreading object lesson that we steward, an image of Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:21-33). Marriage is a challenging, transforming relationship. How does a couple develop the trust and intimacy likened to Christ and the church. Submit one to another. Love. Stay curious. Have fun! Seek to map out the partner’s inner world. Share a vision for the marriage’s mission. “A cord of three strands is not easily broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

Apply

If you are married, prioritize developing a rich map of each other’s inner world. Take time this week to ask your spouse to describe their dreams. Ask about their fears, their joys, their desires. Stay curious; come to know your spouse as intimately as Jesus knows the church, and as the church knows Jesus. What is the mission of your marriage? Have a date night and write down your shared mission as a couple. Create traditions that celebrate your shared meaning and vision.

- **Impure Relationships**

Not all relationships have been offered to you by God to steward. Have not a hint of sexual immorality (Ephesians 5:3). Let some relationships go; be a pruned vine (John 15:2). "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16). "For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world" (1 John 2:16).

"No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to humankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). Notice and take the way out.

Apply

Talk with a trusted Christian friend or with the class, together answering "What is a hint of immorality?" When engaged in "a hint of immorality, what happens in the heart?"

Tell about a time when temptation came and right with it came the way out. Who can you trust when tempted to keep loving you and to help you see the way out?

- **Friendships**

Being a Christian steward of friendships means recognizing that these relationships are a precious gift from God, entrusted to us for nurturing and support. Just as God calls us to be responsible stewards of the Earth, we are also called to care for and cultivate the bonds we share with our friends. In Philippians 2:3-4, the Bible instructs us, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." This verse reminds us to approach our friendships with selflessness, putting the well-being and interests of our friends before our own. By demonstrating love, compassion, and support in our friendships, we can honor our role as Christian stewards, reflecting the grace and love of Christ in our interactions with others.

Apply

This week, attempt to apply your stewardship by taking some intentional steps. Pray for your friends; regularly check in on them; prioritize quality time, general acts of kindness, and encouraging spiritual growth. If there are any strained

friendships consider the process of forgiveness and reconciliation as advocated in Matthew 18:15-17. Approach the friend with humility and a willingness to resolve any issues. Have you been attentive to your friends' needs and emotions recently? How can you support their spiritual development and connection with God?

- **Authorities**

In stewarding relationships as an authority or with authorities, love-filled humility is invested.

If under authority, go the extra mile (Matthew 5:41). Go beyond obligations; authorities will be curious. The difference is appealing. Leaders and oppressors will desire to know more. On the extra mile, tell them of God; invite them into God's family.

"And all of you, dress yourselves in humility as you relate to one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor. Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you." 1 Peter 5:5a-11

If you are an elder, Paul addresses you, saying, "To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Care for the flock that God has entrusted to you. Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly—not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve God. Don't lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your own good example. And when the Great Shepherd appears, you will receive a crown of never-ending glory and honor." 1 Peter 5:1-4

If you are young, "In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders." 1 Peter 5:5a

Apply

How might we go one step further toward full humility?

This week, remove a load from your authority and take it on yourself voluntarily as a gift. As you bear the load, remind yourself, "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ" (Colossians 3:23-24). Notice any change in your relationship with the person. What do you experience in your relationship with the Lord? How does the Lord help in bearing your burden?

- **Enemies**

What is needed in being a steward of enemy relationships? How do we overcome hate of the enemy who is harmful, annoying, and likely to wreak havoc? Their opposition and/or hostility puts us at risk of reacting with vengeful retaliation. Jesus the Good Shepherd was the protector of the flock, laying down his life to protect the sheep (John 10:11-15). We also need to protect believers who are vulnerable from the enemy who comes to harm and destroy. The community helps to protect the survivor and potential future victims from someone who intends harm by enforcing boundaries and consequences. Vengeance is avoided. A prayer for the enemy is an act of love. Loving an enemy begins in a decision to let God have the end of the story.

“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head” (Romans 12:20). In Jesus’ day, a family’s metal brazier held burning charcoal for cooking or keeping a bit of warmth in a cold house at night (In some higher areas of Jerusalem, it snowed in winter). What if the fire had been untended and went out during the day? One would take the cold brazier and carry it, perhaps on the head, going through the street calling for a hot coal (Messianic Bible’s website). If you heard your enemy’s voice would you give them coal? Would you care if your enemy’s family has a cooking fire to make food to eat? There was a known Egyptian tradition of standing with coals on the head as a ritual of shame and repentance (as seen in Proverbs 25:21-22, JDG Dunn’s Romans Commentary). Perhaps Paul has a double meaning in his writing of Romans 12:20. He teaches us, feed your enemy; heap coals on his head. Your enemy will eat, and as he carries his coal home, your enemy will be enacting a ritual of repentance. Perhaps he will actually repent, feeling ashamed, and humbled by your kindness.

Ask to know the Lord’s will in any experience of the enemy. Meditate on key scriptures as you pray. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:43-48). “For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life” (Romans 5:8-10). “Be kind and loving to each other, and forgive each other just as God forgave you in Christ” (Ephesians 4:32). “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.’ In doing this, you

will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:17-21). "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). "Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Stand firm against him, and be strong in your faith. Remember that your family of believers all over the world is going through the same kind of suffering you are. In his kindness God called you to share in his eternal glory by means of Christ Jesus. So after you have suffered a little while, he will restore, support, and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation. All power to him forever! Amen" (1 Peter 5:8-11).

In spiritual warfare with the deceiver, the enemy who sends flaming arrows, we are protected by the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of a right relationship with God, the belt of truth, the shoes of readiness, and the shield of faith. Our offensive weapon is the sword which is the Word of God, who is Christ, the expression of God on the earth (Ephesians 6:10-18).

Apply

Pray for your enemy who is overtaken by darkness. Nelson Mandela said. "We drink the poison we intended for our enemy." Talk out the offense with an empathic Christian friend or therapist; pray together for your own spiritual healing; choose change to ensure that hate cannot become an inner acid.

Contact any community support needed to be safe. Examples are the Noah Project, law enforcement, a therapist, reliable people in the church, and a Christian mentor.

Enter in your browser 'Enemy Pie' read by Camryn Manheim to hear *Enemy Pie*, by Derrick Munson. Have kids join you, but don't skip this as childish. Every adult needs this book.

In prayer and meditation on scripture, ask God to create inner change. When you are ready, invite your enemy to eat with you. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you what God loves and likes about this person. See if you can join God in this.