

For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. This is the wonderful message he has given us to tell others. 2 Corinthians 5:19

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FRIENDSHIP AS A GIFT

BY GORDON BALS

HOW OFTEN are you asked helpful questions? By helpful I mean questions that invite you to comfortably give yourself to another person. A little over two years ago we bought a new house. I remember someone asking me, "Aren't you really excited about moving?" As they asked I thought to myself, "Well excited really hasn't occurred to me." I had a variety of emotions none of which were excitement. I was hopeful that a bigger house would provide some space for us to grow as a family. I was comforted that our new house was a better investment but I was scared by a bigger mortgage and larger house payment. I was sad to leave our old house. Our two youngest daughters were born there and we grew up as a family in that house. We were leaving behind the innocence of a young family. I was also uptight about packing and moving. Moving has never been an experience I embrace easily. I felt a variety of emotions about our move and excitement was not the overriding one.

It made me realize that we often ask questions and relate to others in such a way that is not really caring. Years ago I began to recognize that when I asked my wife or girls if they "Had a good day?" I was not really inviting them to share their life with me. Instead, I was reinforcing that they needed to have

the type of day that would make my life easier. I certainly didn't want them to have a bad day because that meant my night might be harder in trying to be some comfort to them.

As I thought about this I began to ask them, "What kind of day did you have?" In asking the question that way I wanted to communicate two things. One, "I am not afraid of who you are! I want to be with you as we hold onto hope no matter what

to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

Our timidity in moving towards more caring relationships is often a symptom of our lack of faith. Our ability to care for others

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is directly related to how well we have let God care for us. As we continue to open up all of our life to God - to bring our sin and suffering and joy to him - He becomes more real to us. As we let him carry our life we are stronger (have more faith) and are more able to come along-

side someone else and help them bear what they are facing.

But we will not grow the faith to be a better friend by sitting on the sideline waiting for an opportunity we are prepared to tackle. Frequently, when I am encouraging someone to be a better friend I will hear, "I don't know what I am doing." The person I am talking to makes the assumption that since I am a counselor I do know what I am doing. My training as a counselor certainly has helped me to be an encouragement to others but I grow most as I keep sitting down with one person at a

kind of day you had." Hope is bigger than whatever transpires in one day. Two, I was indicating I wanted to share life with them. In asking an open ended question I was saying, "What is going on in your life matters to me whether or not it is something easy to bear so don't be afraid to give me who you are at this moment."

We are often afraid of others and all that is going on inside of them. The way we ask questions and care for others can reveal our fear or selfishness. When God is small to us what is going on in others' lives seems too big. The scriptures say, *All praise*

time and welcome what is going on with them. Wrestling with the conflicts others are facing uncovers my inability to really listen well or be concerned for others and helps me to cry out to God. Caring for others helps me to recognize how much more I need to be supported by the Lord. As I keep aiming to listen and respond well I end up growing in faith. I continue to grow in my ability to encourage others through regular 'practice.'

In addition to refraining from a caring relationship because it pushes us out into deeper waters, we also run into problems when we forget that sacrifice is a normal and natural part of being a friend. For instance, as we are driving over to a friend's house who just called because they were in need we might be talking to ourselves about how to lift them up and subtly imagining how appreciative they will be for our assistance. We are not telling ourselves that caring for them will mean leaving heavier than when we got there.

When our friend goes through difficulty we usually want to make them feel better so that we don't feel worse. Hear what Job said about his friends who were unwilling to help carry his burden. *I could say the same things if you were in my place. I could spout off criticisms and shake my head at you. But if it were me, I would encourage you. I would try to take away your grief. Instead I suffer if I defend myself, and I suffer no less if I refuse to speak* (Job 16:4-6). To walk with others through difficulty we often have to let them lament (complain or anguish) without making them feel better. Larry Crabb says that quick advice feels like rejection.

For example, imagine that

you just listened to your friend talk about their child who got expelled from school. Your friend feels overwhelmed and wants to know that everything will be fine. After talking for 30 minutes they look at you and say, "What should I do?" You feel pulled to tell them everything will be fine and instead you say, "I don't know what to do. It seems like it might be a hard couple of months." It is a battle to listen to a friend in distress without taking it away through a platitude. If you are able to communicate, "I am not sure how to handle this but I am willing to walk with you towards an answer,"

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you are actually helping them carry their burden. By not giving them an answer in the moment you are asking them to wait in hope for an answer that will come to them in the future. Then you leave and your friend feels a little lighter but you feel worse because you are carrying some of their load. In listening well you just took on some of the weight they were carrying.

As we grow in courage to welcome what is going on with our friends and the unselfishness to carry their burdens we often create a space to give meaningful encouragement. However, when it is time to offer specific encouragement we often fail to help a friend find a solution that fits their circumstances or their personal style. When it is time to give advice we often give solutions that make sense to us but not to the ones

we are trying to help. For instance, an affluent friend could be listening to the parent whose child was expelled from school and suggest they just send their child to private school. Now the parent in need feels worse because they don't have the means for private school to be an option. As silly as that example sounds we often give others encouragement from our perspective. As we give encouragement it is important to offer words that fit the situation and the person you are trying to help. *Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth except that which is good for edification, according to the need of the moment that it may give grace to those who hear* (Ephesians 4:29).

Finally, we regularly diminish the glory of our relationships through self-protection. We talk ourselves out of moving towards a friend in need because we know that we will fall short in giving ourselves to them. Caring for others exposes our personal limitations. We will never be patient enough or wise enough to avoid failure in our attempts to be helpful. I regularly fail at caring for others. If we wait to be a friend because we fear disappointing others we will never be a friend. Instead, we ought to offer ourselves and grieve when we hurt others and celebrate when we uplift them. A good friend is not someone who does friendship right a good friend is someone who says I am going to keep walking with you even though our friendship will expose my lack. *A friend is always loyal and a brother is born to help in time of need* (Proverbs 17:17).

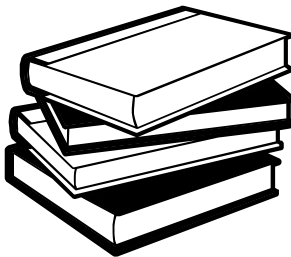
The other way we protect ourselves is by not risking enough. So many of the roads or chances we need to take in life involve faith. A friend in need most likely will have to see, believe or do things differ-

ently to move to a better place. Such a change is challenging and awkward for the person in need. Being a good friend means we may have to persuade others in directions that they are afraid of pursuing. Given that we have no guarantee that the change we are encouraging our friend to make will work out, we pull away from guiding our friends towards more because we don't want to face the consequences of their decision. We withhold the words they need because we are afraid of how it may come back on us. Instead, when appropriate, we are to move away from protecting ourselves and direct our friends towards more.

In view of the fact that the Gospel is summed up in loving God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39) then aiming to be a better friend is a wise use of our energies. We often lack presence, curiosity and care for our friends because we are not walking by faith. As we exercise our faith by being a better friend we will find ourselves needing more of the Lord. It is virtually impossible to separate the two relationships – love of God and love of neighbor – growing in one will lead to good change in the other. So let's keep moving towards our friends and discover how much more the Lord has for us.



BOOK RECCOMENDATION



Breaking the Idols of Your Heart: How to Navigate the Temptations of Life

by Dan Allender and Tremper Longman

This book helps to expose how we look for significance by trying to find life through the pursuit of power, relationships, money, pleasure or work at a high cost. Reading the book will aid you in grasping how to exchange your attachment to idols for rest in the living God.

DAYMARK NEWS

CD'S OF GORDON'S MARRIAGE MINI-SERIES at Oak Mountain Presbyterian Church in July can be purchased for \$10. Go to the website and click on purchase audio for more information. In fact, check out our new website for upcoming seminars, past newsletters, recommended reading and more!

AS THE YEAR END QUICKLY APPROACHES please keep Daymark in mind for year-end giving. We are behind this year on our planned giving so a gift of any size will be greatly appreciated.

UPCOMING EVENTS

EVERY HUSBAND FEELS LIKE A JERK & *Every Wife Treats Him as if He is One*

Church of the Reconciler – Fairfield, Alabama

4 Wednesday Evenings September 19 & 26 and October 10 & 17 6:30-8PM

The cost for all four sessions is \$50 (per couple) and \$25 (per individual).

Any single session is \$15 (per individual). For more information or to register contact

Elizabeth Jones (telephone 205-786-2805 or email Godishope@aol.com)

HOME BASE: *Becoming a Family that Provides the Nourishment of the Gospel*

Decatur Presbyterian Church – Decatur, Alabama

3 Sundays in January 2008 (January 13, 20 & 27)

More details forthcoming...

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