

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SCRIPTURE: Romans 12:9-10

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SERMON: "Relating Like Jesus"

Introduction

Former pastor and author, Bruce Larson, tells the story of being seated on a plane beside a woman who proceeded to share about her daughter. The woman's daughter, nineteen at the time, had dropped out of school, renounced all her parent's values, put her belongings in a pack, and was off wondering around Europe, indefinitely. When she finished telling the story, she asked, "Where did we fail her?"

Larson says the woman then proceeded to share some of her own spiritual journey. She had tried several denominations and religions, even being an agnostic for a while, but was currently attending, and very engaged in a church because she found, for the first time, a man of God, who she said, "identified with his people." He did not talk down to them, but believed they had a capacity for responsible action and goodness. She said, "He made God very real by loving people as they were." Those are compliments any pastor would want to hear.

Larson writes, "What a strange parable. Deeply influenced by a man of God, who has been able to accept her as she is, the woman saw no connection between that, and the way she was relating to her daughter. With her daughter she was critical, fault-finding, judgmental, and preachy."

Larson continued with this observation about Christians and the way we sometimes relate to people. And it is the statement that caught my attention.

"A committed Christian, doctrinally sound, and walking in the light, can go around turning people off, boring people, hurting people, or simply being unable to relate and love others in a meaningful way."

By “**committed Christian**” he means: someone who genuinely and sincerely has chosen to trust Jesus Christ for salvation and seems devoted to that decision.

By “**doctrinally sound**” he means someone who has a good, solid grasp of what the scriptures reveal to us about God, and Jesus, the Holy Spirit and even human kind. In other words, they know the truth of God’s Word well.

By “**walking in the light,**” Larson means a person who has experienced the forgiveness of their own sin, and has experienced the cleansing of their souls through the confession of their sin. This confession is often to another person who is holding them accountable to continue “walking in the light,” as described in the bible.

In other words, Larson is describing, what some of us would presume to be a model follower of Jesus. A Christian whom others might want to be like or imitate. And yet, such people can have the most difficult time relating to others in a loving way. In fact, they can even turn others off to the idea of following Jesus, by the way they relate.

This inability to relate isn’t just a problem between parents and their children. It happens in marriages. It exists in businesses run by Christians where all the employees are purportedly believers. It even happens in thriving churches, like Five Forks. When we turn people off in our communication of the Gospel, it is usually because of our lack of relatability rather than because of the message we bring.

How can we change that? How can we do a better job of relating to people so they will hear the good news about Jesus and want to become Jesus followers? How can we get along better?

The author of Romans gives us some help. Our text is in Romans chapter 12. Earlier in the chapter, the author has given instructions on spiritual gifts. Different people have different spiritual gifts. Then the author appears to hone in on characteristics that should be evident in **every** follower of Jesus. This is what we want to focus on for a bit.

[Romans 12:9-10](#) Don’t just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is

wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. ¹⁰ Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other.

Notice these verses are about how to relate to other people. Not surprisingly, the author begins by talking about **love**. (That is a very appropriate topic for the day right before Valentine's Day, isn't it?) The author of Romans is concerned that we begin with love. This is similar to what Paul does in I Corinthians 13 – that we studied a few months ago.

Paul starts with pointing out that love is supreme, the most important. And then describes what real love looks like. Love has to be at the heart of relationships that are truly Christian or Christlike – so we can **Relate to one another like Jesus**.

There are many components to relationships. We will consider these, as we learn to Relate like Jesus.

Being Real, Identifying with People, learning to **Observe, Ask and Listen to People, Affirming Others**, and **Being Vulnerable**. So, first:

Be Real

Romans 12:9 translated literally, is – **“love without hypocrisy.”** It appears to be a command such as: **“Let your love be without hypocrisy.”**

The idea, conveyed in Romans, is making reference to Greek drama or Greek plays. In Greek drama one actor or actress would play several roles. For example: the actor may be a wealthy land owner for one scene, and then play the part of a slave in another scene. All they did was wear different masks when they were representing a different character.

The word to describe this is our word **‘hypocrite.’** To be a hypocrite was to be one person one moment and another person at another time. In the drama setting that was not a bad thing. It meant the actor was pretending to be another person – necessary for a one actor play.

But later the word came to have a negative meaning. So that, by the time Jesus says of the scribes and Pharisees, “**you hypocrites,**” it was not a good thing. The scribes and Pharisees were pretending to be something they were not. They were pretending to be close to God and they were not. They were pretending to be looking out for others, and they were not. They were looking out for themselves. They were pretending to love others and they were really just loving themselves. They were hypocrites.

So, in Romans we are instructed: “Don’t just pretend to love others, really love them.” Let your love be **real**. **You** be real. Don’t be a hypocrite, an actor, a fake.”

There is nothing quite like hypocrisy that destroys a relationship between two people.

Jesus comes to live in us so that by the power of his Holy Spirit we can become the **unique person** he intended us to be. Our goal is not to become super spiritual or even pretend we are. Our goal is not to be like some other follower of Jesus that we admire. God intends for us to be our own unique selves: To be real, and to really love.

What do we mean by that?

To be real is to be **sincere**, to be **genuine**, to be **authentic**. No imitations or counterfeits.

We can even be kind and good to others but have motives that are not loving. That is hypocrisy. We know we are supposed to “love everyone.” Often that ends up being just **obligatory love** to others, when we don’t really love them. Sincere love is not that.

Scholar James Edwards writes “**sincere Christian love cannot be measured, calculated or staged. It must be honest, genuine and true to the motives of the giver.**”

He goes on to write that “**sincere love, like Christ’s love for us, commits itself to the good of the other, regardless of the cost to self.**”

So, as it relates to how we relate to others in a **real** way, so they see Jesus in us, it

means we discover real, and concrete ways of “**lifting the burdens of others.**” In other words, being real, genuinely loving others can be as simple as: **doing the things that will make life better for other people.** These are the stories of Jesus we find all through the Gospels. (If you come to sermon lab, at 11:00 down in the café, we can talk more about this.)

Gert Behanna had lived a rather tumultuous life, even attempting suicide before she met Jesus and chose to follow him. She then became a sought-after Christian speaker, speaking to many different groups. One person asked her what she had been doing lately and she told this story.

“I travel a lot and frequently use public bathrooms. **(pic)** Which you know are often pretty disgusting. I kept complaining to the Lord about how ‘his servant’ was being treated in such an awful way.”

She said, “Then one day it seemed as if Jesus was saying, ‘Gert, inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me.’” She continued, “I said, ‘Lord, you mean you use these restrooms to?’” When I realized that Jesus was the person who’d be coming in after me, I knew I better do something about it.

Now I go into a messy restroom, I pick up all the towels and stuff them in the wastebasket. I wipe off the mirror, sink and toilet seat. I leave the place as clean as possible and I say, “Well, Lord, there it is, I hope you enjoy it.”

This is what being real towards others can look like. This is lifting the burden of someone else in a practical way. This is part of **Relating like Jesus.**

Get in the habit of regularly asking yourself, “**How can I help lift this person’s burden and make life better for them today?**”

Another way to relate like Jesus is:

Identify with People

This is the mystery of what we refer to, in theology, as ‘**The Incarnation.**’

John 1

¹ In the beginning the Word (Jesus) already existed.

**The Word was with God,
and the Word was God.**

¹⁰ He came into the very world he created, but the world didn’t recognize him.

Jesus left heaven and all the power and authority of being the creator of the universe, to come down and be among us, as one who was totally human – one of us. That is how God identified with us. God became one of us.

And this is what Jesus has commanded us to do. Jesus has told us to go and be among people. Particularly, identify with the ‘least of these,’ the marginalized, the powerless, the disadvantaged.

To identify with people means we must ‘**be with people,**’ in their struggles and hardship and pain. We must open up our lives enough to let people know that we hurt, and hope and feel and laugh and cry in the same way they do. We must admit ‘we don’t know,’ when we don’t know. We must admit it when we are confused. When we are frightened or have doubts. We must take time to be among others as one of them.

Birch Foraker had been president of Bell Telephone company in New York when it was one of the most powerful corporations in America. But he was in the habit of often, when walking out at the end of a sophisticated dinner theater, walking down the street, he would leave his friends and disappear down an open manhole. He did this even though he was dressed in his fancy clothes. Someone asked him “Why?”

His response, “Because there are people working down there on emergency work and I want to encourage them and let them know I appreciate what they are doing on a blustery winter night.”

In a simple way he wanted to go where the people were working hard, hurting,

struggling, and unseen. And he wanted to let them know he knew and cared, and that they **were seen**. He identified with them.

This is what Jesus has done for us. Now, Jesus does not relieve all the hardship and suffering. But we are encouraged in our struggles, knowing that Jesus has suffered, and suffers with us. We are also encouraged when others come and sit with us in our pain.

Who, in your life, needs you to come alongside of them and be with them? Maybe you cannot be with them physically for some reason. Can you reach out to them with a call or a text or a card, to let them know you are thinking about them, you see them, and you care?

Identifying with people in their hurt is part of Relating like Jesus.

Another component of genuinely loving others is:

Observing, Asking, and then Listening to People

Perhaps you remember the story in the bible of Joseph. Sold as a slave by his brothers. He ends up in an Egyptian prison, when he is falsely accused by his master's wife. While in prison, he meets up with two of Pharaoh's servants – a cup bearer, and a baker. Notice how Joseph relates to them.

Genesis 40:5-8 Pharaoh's cup-bearer and baker each had a dream one night, and each dream had its own meaning. ⁶ When Joseph saw them the next morning, he noticed that they both looked upset. ⁷ "Why do you look so worried today?" he asked them.

⁸ And they replied, "We both had dreams last night, but no one can tell us what they mean." "Interpreting dreams is God's business," Joseph replied. "Go ahead and tell me your dreams." And then he listened.

Notice these three things that happened in the story as Joseph related to these men. He **observed** (noticed). He paid attention to the people around him. When he saw their distress, he **asked** about why they looked so worried. And then he **listened** to their stories, really

listened.

There is a secretary who keeps this sign by her phone, written in big crayon. **“I love you enough to listen.”**

The price of real love is often intense and excruciating listening. We must listen to try and hear what somebody is really saying. So often we stop listening well, and begin planning our rebuttal, our scolding or even our advice, or to share our story, because we would rather talk about us, than listen to someone share what they are going through. Real listening is never easy.

To remind himself of this, Bruce Larson has memorized this quote: (and I really like it)

“I know you believe you understand what you think I’ve said,... but I’m not sure you realize... that what you heard... is not what I meant.” (repeat)

Have you ever experienced, and I am sure you have, someone not really listening to what you are saying about a need that you have? How does that impact your sense of whether they are really caring about you or loving you? Not a positive experience is it?

Now turn the tables in your mind, to when we do not really listen to others. When we don’t really listen, our love for them is counterfeit, a mask, a fake. We all have a desire to be heard.

As Jesus followers, intent on improving the way we relate to each other, how can we become more generous listeners? There are several ways to do this.

Show interest in what they are telling you. Ask them more about the situation. Give them non-judging attention. Choose not to criticize what they are telling you. Let them just talk, until they are ready to hear from you.

Also **Pay attention to how, what they are telling you affects you.** If what they are telling you bothers you or makes you angry, can you keep those emotions in check? Is what

they are telling you, making you defensive? You can choose to stifle the need for a rebuttal or a defense on your part.

Do you find yourself **shutting down** when someone begins saying things you don't want to hear? Those are our defense mechanisms kicking in. And when they kick in, we stop listening well.

Genuine relationships require that we listen well to each other.

It is intriguing to study the conversations Jesus had with people. **Nicodemus**, a teacher of the law seemed to be very ignorant of things he should've known. Jesus listened to him.

Jesus listened to **Mary and Martha**, without getting defensive, when they blamed him for their brother's death.

Listening well involves seeing the other person as they are, and allowing them **to be as they are**, while you listen. Learn to listen well in order to relate well. Without listening, we have very little chance of influencing another person in a positive way.

To relate well to others so they know we care, we must also learn to:

Affirm People

The prophet Isaiah made this interesting statement about Jesus' ministry and the way he would speak with, and to people.

[Isaiah 42:2-3](#)

He will not shout or raise his voice in public.

He will not crush the weakest reed or put out a flickering candle.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus described himself as humble and gentle. I love the description someone used of a man who was a follower of Jesus. They said "He had a gentle firmness." What a great description of the way a man related to others. May I remind us we are

called to imitate Christ as this man did. Paul admonishes the Jesus followers to encourage one another and to only speak words that build up and don't tear down.

Ephesians 4:29 Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.

In other words, in our relationships with others, to be genuinely loving relationships, to relate to others like Jesus, we are to be **affirming**.

Tony Amellio was an elevator operator at a prestigious university. It was noticed that Tony was in the habit of making a positive difference in everybody's life who rode the elevator. So, the school had a "Tony Day" in honor of Tony. They gave him an honorary doctorate of transportation degree. The Dean said of Tony, "Tony stands for a number of things that we need and he provides them in a very difficult setting. We need morale and he gives it. We need warmth and he gives it." Another person commented, "when you get off the elevator, Tony always says something that makes you want to go to class. He makes riding in his elevator one of the least dehumanizing experiences."

Tony understood what it means to affirm people.

While doing this, the author of Romans has also called us to '**hate the wrong**' and '**hold tightly to what is good.**' So, affirming people is not simply telling them that whatever they do is good. But it is, noticing the good and the valuable in people and regularly affirming them.

I hope you are wondering, "Where do rebuke and correction fit in" as we relate to others? Perhaps we can wrestle with that in Sermon Lab at 11:00 this morning.

But for now, focus on: **Are you becoming a person who looks for ways to affirm others as part of relating to them like Jesus?**

One more point for this morning on how to relate to others like Jesus:

Be vulnerable – don't "play it safe."

Paul, quoting an early, popular Christian hymn, writes about Jesus:

Philippians 2:7-8

He gave up his divine privileges;

**he took the humble position of a slave
and was born as a human being.**

When he appeared in human form,

**⁸ he humbled himself in obedience to God
and died a criminal's death on a cross.**

No one became so vulnerable as Jesus. He gave up all his privilege and power. He gave up his physical safety. He gave up his public reputation. He gave up his right to a fair trial. He took our blame. Even though he had done no wrong.

He let himself be humiliated, for us. He gave up his status, for us.

What does this mean for us in our relationships with others?

It is natural for us to protect ourselves, to defend ourselves, to preserve and bolster our reputation. This comes naturally when we approach relationships, thinking first about ourselves and our well being and comfort. But if you remember from the earlier part of this message, James Edwards said:

“sincere love, like Christ’s love for us, commits itself to the good of the other, regardless of the cost to self.”

That is making yourself vulnerable in relationships.

It means we have to be willing to say, “I’m sorry. I was wrong and you were right.” Sometimes it even means saying “I’m sorry.” Even if we were not wrong in our own minds. We can be sorry that we acted or spoke in a way that fractured a relationship. And saying sorry in this type of situation will feel like we are admitting to some wrong that we didn’t do. Can we do

that? Is that being honest? Well, Jesus did that for us when he took our sins on himself. So yes, we can take the blame when we were right or not at fault.

That makes us very vulnerable in a relationship. Jesus risked that for our relationship with him. Will we take that risk for a relationship we have with another person? The common practice in almost every sphere of life these days is to try and find someone else to blame.

Being vulnerable also means being willing to make restitution as much as is possible. That is sometimes, rather than just avoiding the person we are at odds with, we initiate measures of restitution. This is vulnerable for us because the other person may reject our attempts. The other person may continue to attack us and even try to destroy us further.

What I'm talking about is scary, humbling, and risky – and very few of us regularly attempt this. We are afraid people won't like us. We are afraid people will see us as less perfect than we want them to see us. But vulnerability is necessary for authentic loving relationships. It is how Jesus relates to us.

Following Jesus and relating to others in the way Jesus relates to us is to be different from the way the world typically behaves in this area of being vulnerable in our relationships.

Relating like Jesus means allowing ourselves to be vulnerable.

If we want to be people: who are **committed** followers of Jesus; are **doctrinally sound**; those who have experienced the cleansing of confession and are **walking in the light**, we must add this to the description, “

“Not pretending to love others, but really loving them,” so we **Relate to others like Jesus.**

May God help us grow in the area of relating to one another the way Jesus relates to us.

PRAY