

**Meet Up. (Love His People, Part Two: Christ-Centered Relationships)  
Colossians 3:16 (see also Romans 1:8-12, 12:10, Ephesians 4:29)**

September 25, 2022

**Prayer**

Scripture declares if you are in Christ, you are a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come. This verse makes me wonder: How well are we experiencing the newness of life in Christ?

When I first surrendered my life to Christ, all things really did become new. Suddenly the Bible burst to life and started speaking to me, gathering with the church became something I wanted to do and the conviction that Jesus really is Lord became the lens through which I viewed all of life.

But as the years turned to decades, I experienced seasons where life didn't feel so new. Why is that? Psalm 92:12-14 tells us "The righteous will flourish like a palm tree...They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green..."

No matter where you are in your walk of faith, how fresh and green do you feel today? How well are you experiencing the newness of life in Christ? I'm here to tell you that, by God's grace, the new life He offers us never gets old and there are things we can do at any age that keep us fresh, green and bearing fruit.

In the same way that plants need things like sunshine and water, so too there are certain things that are essential for our own growth in Christ. I want to focus on one of those elements today and a great starting point is found in Colossians 3:16.

Just prior to this verse Paul reminded the Colossians that those who put their trust in Jesus' death and resurrection have not only died with Him but have also been raised to share in His life with Him and now it is His life that flows through them. With that, let's look at 3:16

<sup>16</sup> Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

You have been given a new life. So, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom." There is so much here.

Teaching and admonishing from God's word is not reserved for pastors and teachers alone. We are each to let Christ's word dwell in us richly so that we can teach and admonish each other.

Our Lord's teaching is central to our lives. Jesus talked about His words abiding in us and He said that His Holy Spirit will remind us of everything He has taught us.<sup>1</sup> Paul told the Romans that he wanted to be with them so that they could mutually encourage one another

by each other's faith (1:12). He told the Ephesians that their words to one another should only be what is helpful for building others up according to their specific need.

This is more than just posting Bible verses on our social media platforms. As members of the Body of Christ, we are in a relationship with others that is close enough to know what another person might need to grow spiritually.

When we teach and admonish one another with God's word we are helping each other weave His truth into the fabric of our daily lives. Like the plant that lacks sunshine or water, if this kind of spiritual friendship is missing, our spiritual growth will be muted, and our fruit will be limited. Or said another way, our experience of new life in Christ will be less than what it could be.

I wonder, who knows you really well? Do you have someone in your life who knows your secrets, your fears, your temptations and even the "sin that so easily entangles you"? If you have someone like this in your life, does this person help you see your life through the lens of scripture and help you weave those truths into the fabric of your life?

To teach is to inform and to provide information that person may not have. To admonish is to correct, to show from scripture the path God has intended and lovingly encourage that person to walk that path.<sup>ii</sup>

When the word of Christ dwells in us and we share it with others, and the word of Christ dwells in others and they share it with us, then we both experience spiritual growth and life-change. We all have friends, but I think the kind of friendship mentioned here goes beyond what our culture typically expects.

I tend to see friendship along a spectrum. On the one side are functional friendships. These are friends we have because we get something we need from them. Through various activities or conversations, we connect with these friends to reduce our boredom, take the edge off of loneliness, accomplish a goal or meet a need.

The conversations here are often about the thing we are doing or the things going on around us from weather to sports to current news to our aches, pains and illnesses. Here we tend to focus on external facts. Nothing is wrong with this. These are good, right and needed friendships.

On the other side of the spectrum there are formational friendships. These are friends who meet so that they can encourage each other in the faith. Sure, they do and enjoy other things as well, but their primary purpose is to help each other engage the scripture and weave it into their specific life-context.

The conversations here include what is going on inside our souls, our internal response to the facts we experience. In these conversations we seek to process these experiences in light of the Scriptures.

Few relationships are only functional or only formational. Every one of our friendships falls somewhere between these two extremes and, over time, we tend to slide back and forth across this spectrum.

I have found that the gravitational pull in our culture is always toward functional friendships. I can't count the number of times I've learned of a group that started with the intent of helping form each other's faith and after six or more months they spend most of their time talking about the surface facts of their lives rather than the way they are seeking to process those experiences in a biblical way.

What is stunning to me is that formational friendships are what God has given us in Christ. It is no small thing that friendship is the word God uses to describe the relationship He desires to have with us. Jesus in John 15:15

<sup>15</sup> I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

Jesus was their friend, one who used God's word to teach and admonish them with all wisdom. We are not Jesus, but we are expected to do with each other, what He did for them. So, let's go a little deeper into better understanding spiritual friendships by looking at five elements.

The starting point is no surprise to anyone. Spiritual friendships must contain **love**. But this love has a different focal point than we may be used to.

When our culture thinks about loving another person, we often get the image of two people standing face to face looking at each other. They are primarily asking what their loved one needs and how they might be able to meet that need. This is a good thing.

The love of spiritual friends has a slightly different focus. Rather than standing face to face looking at each other, spiritual friends stand side by side looking at the same destination. Rather than ask what their friend needs, they want to know what their friend needs to take the next step toward a deeper experience of Christ's life in them.

Spiritual friends are on a journey together. They are pilgrims, not vacationers. Those on a vacation stop at one place and desire to get as much pleasure out of it that they can. Pilgrims are on their way to a specific destination. They know they are just passing through and so don't want to become overly entangled to their present location. They live with a larger goal in mind.

Spiritual friends look for ways to help one another love God more fully and live more faithfully. They don't just want you to grow in wholeness; they also want you to grow in holiness.

For spiritual friends, love is standing side by side as you look toward the same horizon.

But love is just the first element. Spiritual friends also need to practice **honesty**.

Whenever we think about honesty we tend to think about being honest with the people around us. But true honesty begins in a deeper place; it begins by being honest with ourselves.

What's the *real* reason behind my fear? What is my core motivation for hiding this part of my life from others? Why do I respond this way whenever I am in this kind of situation?

We are experts at hiding the truth from ourselves. Honesty in spiritual friendships requires us to first be honest with ourselves, and then be honest with our friend.

That kind of honesty is hard to do because it requires vulnerability. If I entrust something like this to another person, they might use it to hurt me. Earlier in Colossians 3 Paul said that Jesus has destroyed the human categories that separate us.

In God's kingdom there is no Greek, Jew, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free because Christ is all and is in all. Jesus Christ is the center of it all. Paul might as well have written, "In God's kingdom there is no one person who is worse than another, but Christ is all and is in all." Jesus is the center, the goal, the destination. We can be vulnerable with each other because we are all in the same group, we all need and have received God's grace in Jesus.

It is the reason Paul told the Corinthians,

<sup>15</sup> Christ died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them.

<sup>16</sup> So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view....<sup>17</sup> This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

A spiritual friend loves us enough to help us embrace the life Christ has given us. With a friend like that, we can be vulnerable, honest with ourselves and with each other. And so we teach and admonish one another with the word of Christ and watch what Jesus does.

Love is standing side by side as you look toward the same horizon.

Honesty is the courage to confront blind spots in ourselves and each other in love.

Love and honesty are now joined by the third element, **intimacy**.

Intimacy describes a close connection with another person so intimacy can be deepened in many different areas. Spiritually. Emotionally. Physically. Vocationally. Recreationally. The list goes on. While spiritual friends share intimacy in many areas, they intentionally seek to deepen their spiritual intimacy.

Spiritual intimacy is deepened when we open up to what is going on inside of us as we share our experience of God in all of life.

In God's Kingdom, Christ is all and is in all. He is the very center of everything about our lives. So, how do we experience Him in our struggle, in our grief and in our celebrations? When we begin to share this part of our lives with a friend, we deepen an intimacy that deepens all the other connections we share with this friend.

Love is standing side by side as you look toward the same horizon.  
Honesty is the courage to confront blind spots in ourselves and each other in love.  
Intimacy is sharing our experience of God in all of life.

Fourth, spiritual friends also experience **mutuality**.<sup>iii</sup> In other words, this friendship is a two-way street. Information and sharing flows both ways. It is not about the master sharing with the apprentice. It is about two pilgrims meeting each other where they are and encouraging their journey to their shared destination.

Mutuality does not mean equality. Jesus was friends with His disciples, but they were not His equal. Nevertheless, when you think about what Jesus did and what He shared with the disciples, Jesus shared His life with them. He was their friend.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus told His friends—Peter, James and John—that He needed them and He then shared His deepest heart with them as he received their support (faulty as it was). He showed them love, displayed honesty, experienced intimacy and practiced mutuality.

Mutuality is a two-way commitment.  
And that leaves us with the last element of a spiritual friendship: **accompaniment**.

I asked Travis to describe Lisa's goal when she accompanies a student on the piano and his answer hits the bullseye for spiritual friends.

Whether spiritually or musically, to accompany another person requires us to be empathetic. We need to know what the other person needs to excel in their performance and then we provide it. Serving a person in this way requires that we stay in close, supportive contact as we subsume ourselves under their performance.

Our job is to make the other person shine and to help them be a success. This relationship is not about us; it is about them.

As in music, we can spiritually accompany another person for a long or short season, for an entire career or a single song. This kind of relationship can be built over long distances and can even survive long periods of being apart. No matter how long the separation, there appears to be no time apart. They pick it up and run again.

Love is standing side by side as you look toward the same horizon.  
Honesty is the courage to confront blind spots in ourselves and each other in love.  
Intimacy is sharing our experience of God in all of life.  
Mutuality is a two-way commitment.

Accompaniment requires staying in close, supportive contact.

Let me share this same list with different words.

**Spiritual Friends:**

- 1) Commit to help each other journey toward their common destination of Christ
- 2) Remain honest with themselves and each other
- 3) Share their internal experience of God in all of life
- 4) Do this for each other
- 5) Remain in close, supportive contact, connecting with empathy whenever they get together

I can simplify this even more with the words of Stan Ott. When you are together, remember to practice word, share and prayer.<sup>iv</sup>

This kind of friendship is not something we have to add to what we are already doing. It is merely a matter of becoming more intentional to lean toward formational friendships with the friends we already have.

While we can be a spiritual friend to anyone, not everyone will be such a friend with us. So, when someone responds by drawing you closer to the formational side of the friend spectrum that is a cue to ask if they'd be willing to walk with you as a spiritual friend.

What I just described is the ideal, it is the goal we strive for. The truth, however, is that we live in a fallen, broken world. There will be seasons where this kind of relationship will hurt and will get uncomfortably messy. Spiritual friends will fail each other. But in His grace and goodness, God even uses our messes to grow His life in us.

The new life Jesus gives us is not something we generate in ourselves. It is not something that comes by following some self-help scheme. What we are looking at today is not something else we each have to do. No, this is simply about being intentional to live out who you already are in Christ. Since you have been given new life in Christ....

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell richly in you as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom. And whatever you do, in word, deed, emotion, thought or attitude, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

Closing Prayer

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<sup>i</sup> See John 15 and 16

<sup>ii</sup> Second Timothy 3:16-17 comes to mind. "All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that God's servant may be fully equipped for every good work."

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To teach is to help a person grasp what it means and how it is applied. To rebuke is to show a person where they are not applying the scripture faithfully. To correct is to show the brother or sister how they can more closely align their lives with Jesus' teaching. And to train is to give someone the specifics he or she needs to live out biblical truth within their context.

<sup>iii</sup> Mutuality requires commitment. It requires a covenantal agreement to walk the path of faith together.

<sup>iv</sup> Spiritual friends do three things when they get together. They engage God's word together, seeking to help each other weave its truth into their lives. They share their honest thoughts, feelings and emotions with each other as they ponder their experience of God in all of life. And finally, they pray about these things together.