



Catalog No. 1788  
 Ephesians 5:22–6:9  
 11th Message  
 John Hanneman  
 August 31, 2014

# FORMED THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

*SERIES: FORMED INTO CHRIST*

All of us desire relationships with others and long for community. Social media alone tells us how much we want to connect with other people. Growing up we begin thinking of marriage. We have dreams for our children before they are born. We form attachments to friends and look for groups of people to join, places to belong. We all live in a variety of circles where we have relationships—family, school, social groups, neighbors, clubs, etc. We could make a long list of the people in our lives that we relate to on some level.

Relationships are extremely important to us and play a major role in our lives. They influence and affect us in significant ways. Some of these relationships are difficult and challenging. However, I am going to suggest that all of these people are in our lives for a God-given purpose—to be a part of God’s plan to form us into Christ and for us to be a visible representative of Jesus to others. Even the most difficult relationships are there because God wants them there even if we don’t.

We continue our “Formed Into Christ” summer series by exploring the relationships we have and reflect on how God might use these relationship to mature us in Christ.

## The Spiritual Importance of Relationships

Relationships are important to our spiritual life for at least three reasons. First, they are important to us because they are important to God. God created us for community rather than aloneness. To be human means we are relational beings. God himself lives in a triune community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and he invites us into this community. Our desire for relationships reflects the nature of God.

Second, relationships provide a mirror that reflects back to us our best and worst. The mirror doesn’t change us but just reflects us as we are. The closer the relationship, the more detail we see of ourselves. This mirror also reflects how we relate to God since we tend to relate to God and others in the same way, with the same relational dynamics. For example, if we are performing to earn approval from people or we don’t feel unconditionally loved in our family, then this factors into our relationship with God.

Third, maturing in Christ takes place in the context of others. We are not ourselves by ourselves. We cannot grow just as an individual, as a private affair, although that is the tendency we see in the Western Church. People who seem to be obstacles to growing in Christ are actually the means to growth and maturity.

When the NT writers list the characteristics of the old self we are to put off and the new self we are to put on, most of the characteristics apply to relationships—anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk, and lying, versus compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness (Col 3:8–9; 12–13).

The same is true with the deeds of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit: “enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions,

divisions, envy” versus “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:20–23 ESV). We learn how to be loving, kind, patient, forbearing and forgiving in relationships.

## The Challenge of Relationships

Even though we desire meaningful relationships and recognize their spiritual importance, all of us know that relationships are a challenge. Let me mention a few general reasons why this is true.

### Fears and insecurities

This began in the garden when Adam and Eve sinned. Initially this first couple was naked and unashamed but after their transgression they were naked and ashamed. As a result they hid themselves from each other and from God. We all inherit this tendency to wear masks instead of being vulnerable and open. We are self-conscious and fearful. When sin entered the world of humanity it had a drastic effect on relationships.

### Obsession with power and control

Our inner fears and need for security often result in controlling other people. We want to dominate others. We want others to bend to our agenda. We do not want to see ourselves as inferior in any way or have other people dictate our path. We want to tell people what to do.

### Attachments to what people think of us

We can become people-pleasers and act in accordance to the wishes of others. We so want the approval others that we readily yield to others to gain favor. We resist any sort of conflict that might endanger the relationship and lack the courage to be honest.

### Holding onto resentments

All of us at some point encounter hurt from other people and as a result we relegate these people to a black list. We harbor resentments, replay events that hurt us, and feast on the internal anger that we hold onto. Our wounds make us distrustful and skeptical of others. We try to protect ourselves.

### Refusal to accept differences

We think that everyone should be just like us and see the world the way we do. We can’t accept different points of view. We have a need to be right and dismiss folks who do not agree with us.

Seeing the challenges to relationships in others is often easy. However we are often blind to our own tendencies. We might reflect this morning on our own patterns that make relationships challenging and bring them to God.

## The Pattern for Relationships

Since all of us experience challenges in the way we relate to others, we need a pattern to follow, a model to emulate. Paul gives

us this pattern in the book of Ephesians, where he talks about the key relationships of marriage, family, and work. Most of you are familiar with what Paul says in Ephesians 5:22–6:9 regarding wives and husbands, fathers and children, slaves and masters.

Paul's instructions for home and work flow from some general exhortations; to walk wisely, to understand God's will, and to be filled with the Spirit.

**Look carefully then how you walk . . .**

**Understand what the will of the Lord is . . .**

**Be filled with the Spirit . . .**

**...submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.**

(Eph 5:15–21)

One aspect of the Spirit-filled life is to submit to one another in the church out of reverence or fear of Christ, meaning we yield to others rather than trying to dominate. Jesus is Lord of the church, the head, and there is no superiority or inferiority in his body. Think about how many conflicts and divisions in churches would be avoided if we simply heeded this one verse.

When Paul goes on to talk about family and work he is giving instructions about how we yield in specific ways and relate to others after the pattern of Christ.

**Wives submit ... as to the Lord.**

**Husbands love ... as Christ loved the church**

**Children, obey your parents in the Lord**

**Fathers bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.**

**Bondservants .... as you would Christ, ...as bondservants of Christ**

**Masters do the same to them (Eph 5:15–6:9)**

My focus today is not on the specific exhortations Paul gives but to see the big picture—Jesus is central to the way we relate. Thirteen times Paul uses the word “Lord” or “Christ” and once he uses “Savior” in talking about these six categories. We relate to another person as if they are Jesus (i.e. wives and slaves) or as if we are Jesus (i.e. husbands and fathers). Therefore, if we live according to the pattern of Christ then our relationships become a means for spiritual growth, an opportunity to grow into Christlikeness. Relationships are the laboratory where we work out spiritual formation and learn to live as new creations in Christ.

## Circles of Relationships

Now let's consider four areas in which we live—home, church, work, and the world at large. The slide depicts these as a series of concentric circles. As we move outward from the center we note that we are moving from the people with whom we are usually the closest and most intimate to those who are more surface and less-well known. We start where Paul starts in Ephesians, with the home.

### Home

Home includes our relationships with a spouse and children, parents and siblings, in-laws and outlaws. This area is the most difficult and challenging spiritually for many reasons. Our ego and emotions are so bound up in these relationships. We have a variety of understandings regarding what it is to be a husband, wife, father, or mother. We carry family of origin dynamics into our immediate family. Following the pattern of Christ at home is not easy because home is where we want to relax, let down, be selfish, and indulge pleasures.

There are many examples in the Bible of people who had difficult family situations, like Joseph with his brothers, or David with both his brothers and children. Even Jesus had conflicts and tensions with his own family. His family kept trying to tell him what to do.

Marriage is hard, maybe the toughest thing we do in life. Perhaps some people luck out but the majority of people struggle in one way or another. We can have huge expectations for our spouse that no person can live up to. Men and women are very different and we can refuse to accept those differences. Our spouse might experience God differently than us or be in a different place spiritually.

Singleness is tough too but the issues are different, dealing with loneliness and disappointment. But being single is also used by God to shape us into Christ.

Children force us to serve beyond our capabilities and strength. Parents can be more concerned with behavior and performance than character and spiritual growth. We can be blind to the emotional dynamics in our own home.

Dealing with parents and siblings can be draining. There is no perfect family and most of us have some hurt and pain that we must deal with at some point in our life.

There are many wonderful things about family, but most of us know that it isn't always easy. The bottom line is that we might be able to hide things out in public, but we can't hide at home. Marriage and family expose everything about us, how truly selfish and self-centered we really are, and thus becomes a primary place where we learn to love, serve, encourage, forbear, and forgive.

I always saw myself as a reserved, mild-mannered, easy-going introvert growing up. I would have never known I had an anger issue unless I got married. When I got married I saw how angry I could become when I didn't get my way or something didn't go the way I wanted. I have been learning things about myself now for forty years.

You might reflect this morning on how God is using your family relationships to form you into the pattern of Christ? What might God be calling you to change? Being more accepting and gracious, letting go of expectations, or perhaps humbling yourself to ask forgiveness?

### Church

Our church community is extremely important in being formed into Christ because the church is the family of God. We all are brothers and sisters in Christ. But church has its own challenges. We want the church to be perfect and attractive but in reality people in the church can be a mess, no matter how well they dress. If we want to find a really nice group of people to be with on a regular basis we are more likely to find it outside the church.

People come to church for all sorts of reasons and with a whole range of expectations. People who are looking to get their needs met by others are usually disappointed because only God can satisfy our deepest desires. People get tired of trying to find what they are looking for in the church and go off on their own, or they continue to fantasize about a utopian church. We often hear that people have started going to another church because they had a difficult time connecting with others. We long for a loving, accepting community but we don't recognize the fact it takes effort.

But having a spiritual community is central to our growing in Christ. Church is a workshop rather than a finished product. We are

forced to be with people who are very different than us, get involved in their lives, and pray for them. Richard Rohr writes:

Living in community means living in such a way that others can access me and influence my life and that I can get ‘out of myself’ and serve the lives of others. Community is a world where brotherliness and sisterliness are possible. By community I don’t mean primarily a special kind of structure, but a network of relationships.<sup>1</sup>

We create community not through structures and programs but through being in meaningful relationships.

The word that Paul uses for believers is the word “saints,” meaning holy ones. People can be a mess but from God’s point of view we are saints, this is our identity in Christ. Church is the place where we see each other as saints, a place where God is at work, a place where we are all growing up together into Christ. Church is a messy place but this is where God makes himself visible. Perhaps, God wants to show the world what he can do with the worst.

There is no perfect church and so it is important for us to plant ourselves for the long haul instead of looking for quick fixes or moving on if nothing is happening. We get involved relationally and focus on growing in Christ. We submit our lives to one another and live according to the way of the cross instead of the way of the world. We get involved in the mess where God is working.

We might reflect this morning on our expectations of church and whether we are part of a smaller community where we are involved in people’s lives. Who are you helping to grow in Christ? Who is helping you to grow in Christ? This is our deepest calling.

### Work

We spend a significant amount of time at work, more time than we spend in any other place. This area too has some specific challenges. Work can become a place that feeds our ego, a place where we look for fulfillment and identity through job performance. We value productivity and drivenness over people. Our title or the money we make can become our top priority. Work can be a frustrating place due to the people we work with or the bosses who are over us. We should remember that even though work is good, God pronounced the ground cursed. Work will never be perfect.

These challenges might cause us to be a different person at work than we are at home or in the church. We can enter the secular world disconnected and separated from God. Paul’s words to slaves in Ephesians 6 reminds us that we do our work as servants of Christ. We are working as if our boss was Jesus himself. Work is not a place for fulfillment or identity but rather a place of service. One job is not better than another. God uses work to grow our character and integrity. God even gives us tough bosses for our growth.

The challenges of work can also make us unaware or uninvolved in the lives of people we work with. But God puts us next to people and these can be significant relationships. If we have the attitude of working hard and serving the Lord, people are attracted to us and want to know why we are different. We can take an interest in others, invite them to lunch, and ask them about their life. We might have opportunities to share our own life and faith. There also might be other believers at our place of work with whom we find encouragement to keep the right priorities.

You might reflect this morning on how God is involved at your work or how your priorities might need to change. What have you

found helpful for staying present and connected with God at work? What relationships is God asking you to cultivate?

### World

Finally, there is the world at large in which we are involved—neighborhood, school, soccer team, theater group, etc. Here too God puts us next to people where we are learning to be like Jesus. We encounter all sorts of people and some might be rather challenging. But again, God can use all these situations to shape and mold us. And in some of these circles we can share our faith or talk about spiritual things as God gives us opportunity.

As I have mentioned before my wife has a horse that she boards in a nearby pasture. When she goes to the barn she not only spends time with the horse but she also spends time with the people there. She knows them on a first name basis, lingers to talk, and goes to lunch with them. I know how often she goes to lunch because I see the Visa bill! Some of these people have been challenging but they have provided an opportunity for her to share her faith in Jesus. These relationships don’t happen randomly; they happen because Liz feels she is called to be involved in these people’s lives.

We might reflect this morning on how God is leading us to involve ourselves in the lives of others in our community. We also might reflect on how we are known in our community. Paul tells us in 1 Timothy that elders are to be above reproach, but we might take that word for ourselves as well.

My message this morning is a simple one, but relationships are anything but simple. We desire community and relationships but we aren’t very good at handling them. Let me leave you with four things to take away:

### Trust God’s Sovereignty

Believe that God has given us the relationships in our life. Our parents are not an accident, we didn’t bring home the wrong child from the hospital, and we didn’t marry the wrong person. God has chosen these relationships for good. His plans are bigger than our plans. He has us where he wants us to be.

Trusting God is what Joseph did when his brothers betrayed him and sold him into slavery. Joseph would have never chosen the path God laid out for him, but he came to trust in God’s sovereignty and, even though his brothers meant evil, he came to believe that God meant it for good.

### Accept Actively

We see this in Ruth’s loyalty and faithfulness to Naomi when their husbands and Naomi’s sons die. Naomi tells Ruth to stay in Moab, but Ruth insists that she go back to Israel with Naomi. She makes an intentional choice to be a companion with Naomi. We also see this in Acts 8 when the Spirit tells Philip to join an Ethiopian eunuch in his chariot.

Instead of being passive we are to intentionally embrace the relationships that we have, the good, the bad, and the ugly. This means reflecting on who is in our lives and discerning whom God wants us to spend time with.

### Focus on Growth

We can go to parenting classes, marriage seminars, and learn how to have good boundaries, and all of this is good and something we should do, but the key to being who we are designed to be in relationships is being formed into Christ. We can move to a different city, trade our spouse in for another, or change jobs but that won’t

change us inside. Instead of trying to change others we focus on being changed. And what really changes us is growing to maturity in Christ through the work of the Spirit.

### Experience Freedom

The more we grow and live our life in Christ the more we experience freedom and openness. We don't have to fear or take control. We can communicate in healthier and more honest ways. We can love and serve without bitterness, resentment, or trying to get our needs met from others. This is God's desire for us, to live in freedom in relationship with others and be a visible representation of Jesus.

*“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.” (Heb. 13:20–21 ESV)*

1. Richard Rohr, *Simplicity*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2003) 65

© 2014 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino