

Connected



Growing in Your
Relationship with God
Through Relationships
with His People

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connected

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I. Introduction

Why?

When people make a decision to cross the line into a relationship with Jesus that lasts forever, the decision feels, at the time, like one that will be easy and self-perpetuating. Whether it's at camp in a really exciting worship experience or across the table in discussion about spiritual issues, we think that it will always be as easy as it is in that moment.

The problem, of course, is that anyone who has known the Lord for awhile knows that this feeling of freshness wanes over time, and it gets more difficult to maintain perspective when the new component of faith goes away.¹ This isn't a problem of the last couple of years or even a problem that is exclusive to teenagers; it impacts people of every age and socioeconomic background. The problem is our own sin and flesh, which doesn't go away after conversion. As we wrestle with what it means to know and follow God, we must deal with the prime reason for any struggle – and certainly the root cause of all struggles – idolatry.² When we put things before God, the balance is upset. We will go down a path that doesn't glorify God and brings pain into our lives and the lives of those around us.

The reason for this booklet is to point followers of Jesus to the resources that are available to all of us. Using relationships presses us into our faith more deeply and encourages us.

If we desire a growing relationship with the God of the universe, then we must be committed to growing relationships here that help provide perspective – both inside the challenges of today and those that help us see what is coming down the road. Scripture provides scores of examples pointing to the wisdom that one person can give to another in relationship.³

My sincere hope is that you will have an empowered spiritual life in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, utilizing the relationships of those around you in more intentional ways.



II. Paul, Barnabas and Timothy

The premise of relational ministry is best encapsulated in the relationships visible throughout Scripture. To keep the idea concise, I will work primarily through the ministry relationships of Paul, Barnabas and Timothy in the New Testament, but will, at times, highlight other examples to support certain components.

The New Testament, in many ways, mirrors our own spiritual walk as the story of Jesus unfolds. The Apostles begin with extreme fervor and miraculous signs early in Acts,⁴ and then, over time, friction and conflict arise throughout the Church.⁵ The details of solving these problems are outlined in the letters of the New Testament.

For this reason, we can look into the ways the Apostles met the challenging ministry that was before them to address many of the challenges we face in our own spiritual lives. As we see the relationships in the New Testament, and the ministry that takes place within and through them, I hope the formula will be clear as to the need for us to form those same kinds of strategic relationships in our own lives.

I'm indebted to Waylon Moore for the idea that every believer is designed to have a Paul to follow, a Barnabas to walk with and a Timothy to lead. It is incredibly important that we wrap our minds around the fact that these people fulfill specific roles in our lives, and we are fulfilling significant roles in their lives as well. The base component of relational discipleship is that it reaches beyond my perspective and opens up my immediate situation to the insights of others who know and love Jesus.

Scripture talks about it like a chain. Paul tells us that we should be smart about who we invest in significantly. We want to pour ourselves into those who will pour into others who will also pour out.⁶ It's an incredible idea that we could be starting a chain reaction that empowers ministry and Gospel changing power for generations!

If we can tap into the potential of relationships with other believers, our daily walk with God can be empowered and challenged regularly while our perspective on specific situations and life in general is widened. The enemy and our flesh primarily work to limit our perspective and press us to make decisions without considering the ultimate consequences (and definitely not God's Word), just like Jesus during His temptation in the wilderness.⁷ By widening our perspective and creating roadblocks in our decision-making processes,

we can ensure wiser choices in everyday life as well as a stronger emphasis on considering the character development that is taking place in us over time.

It is vital that we understand that the individual decisions we make are extremely important to God, but He is also concerned with the overall, long-term growth we have in relationship with Christ. The week after an exciting experience or when we feel especially connected is terrific, but we need to ensure that the overall path we are on spiritually is one that takes us closer to Jesus each month, year and season of our life, even if the specific events are difficult or have failure in them.

As we consider relational ministry, let's remember that the goal is always to point one another to Jesus in situations and life. The tendency is to shift slowly into behavior modification and life coaching that doesn't involve the need for or dependency upon the Gospel. While relationships empower our spiritual journey, the miracle is that the grace to live for God⁸ comes by the power of the Holy Spirit because of the work of Jesus. If we lose sight of that, then we lose sight of the whole reason for our growth process.





III. Paul - Mentor

HOW THEY DID IT

Paul is such a great example of someone who wasn't perfect and, in that imperfection, sought to give glory to God for every last drop of his redeemable attributes. As a man, he had a considerable resume prior to meeting Christ,⁹ but he also brought an extreme allegiance to his former way of life that martyred followers of Jesus. Between his spiritual lineage and his earthly credentials as a strongly devout Jew, there was no reason he should have switched sides and plenty for why he shouldn't have, but God had other plans.¹⁰

On the road to Damascus, Jesus met Paul, and the rest of Paul's life would never be the same.¹¹ When we consider the radical transformation of Paul after his conversion, it's no surprise that he became a central figure in the early church. The passion that he had used against the church was now being focused on the work of the Gospel.

With so many possibilities of how Paul could spend his time, I wonder how long it took him to focus in on relationships. Something tells me that he knew from the Spirit that the relationships he could pour into would have far more impact than him simply trying to do all the work himself. Undoubtedly, Paul was pulling from his Jewish roots as he remembered studying under a Rabbi from a very young age. As one of their goals, students of a Rabbi would be so close to their teacher that the dust from his sandals would be on them. It's a great metaphor showing just how much the instruction was valued.

As we read the New Testament, it can be easy – when we simply skim it – to think that the books are written primarily to churches or larger groups, when in fact the vast majority of the New Testament was written to individuals. Paul, in particular, wrote letters to just a few very close mentorees and he desired them to take the words and teaching to the larger groups.

The clearest example of this is Timothy. Paul spent the most time writing to Timothy in the New Testament. Paul viewed him as a spiritual son,¹² and he spoke to him with such a level of loving encouragement and exhortation that we see quickly that the path for Timothy was very bright. Paul saw it as a pivotal part of his ministry to not only spend time with Timothy, but to help him in the specific ministry in which he found himself serving. The text indicates that Paul and Timothy spent considerable time together,¹³ but it was when Timothy was in the lab of ministry that the words of Paul were most crucial to his development.

Paul met Timothy when he was a teenager and saw a profound potential in him to impact the world with the Gospel. From there Paul invested significant time into the relationship and seemed to prioritize the development of Timothy over a lot of other ministry.

Paul helped Timothy in areas of personal development, faith and ministry. Their relationship wasn't focused on just one thing, but ebbed and flowed where he needed instruction, exhortation and even encouragement. Their relationship remained healthy because Timothy was teachable and understood the extent of his need. There are only so many books that can be read or lists worked through. At some point, the mentoring relationship has to be focused on the personal development of the people in the relationship; sometimes systems work better for that goal and sometimes they don't. It's important to focus, like Paul, on the needs of a Timothy over the desires of a Paul.

HOW WE DO IT

When we consider what it means to be a Paul today, it probably seems pretty overwhelming, but the basics are less intimidating than you think. It doesn't mean that you're perfect. In fact, if you think you are, you better review the Gospel again. It means that you recognize that you're on a spiritual journey right now and, since the path is long for you and everyone else, you can help those a few paces back to see some of the challenges that are awaiting them.

Depending on how this booklet made it to you, there might not be a need for me to explain how to acquire a Timothy, because someone may have already asked you to be their Paul. If you are looking for a Timothy though, it is helpful to begin with your immediate sphere of influence. Hopefully you're involved in ministry somewhere which gives you relationships with younger people for whom you may have some life lessons and spiritual insight.

If you need help finding someone, you can contact the Student Ministries Pastor, and we can go through a process to determine if we have someone that is looking for a mentor that is a fit for your profile. If you're a new face, there may be a process and some time needed to ensure that it's the best fit for everyone involved, but the more people we have ready to mentor, the better.

My recommendation to mentors on the front side of mentoring relationships is to determine what the expectations are for both parties. Find out what time commitment is expected and what character attributes your mentoree sees in you that they desire for themselves. I also encourage you, in your first session together, to share five things that you wish you would have known when you were that age. From that point, it may make sense to have a book you're reading together on a topic pertinent to the season of life that your mentoree is exploring, or go through a section of Scripture during the week that you discuss together each time you meet.

As far as frequency is concerned, I would recommend meeting at least every other week at a consistent time and place. The more routine you can build into the relationship, the more sustainable it will be. There is a real tendency in these relationships to let them slip into less and less frequent connections. The more time you can spend together, especially at first, the more meaningful and helpful the relationship will be over time.

A real appraisal of your availability needs to be made before commencing any kind of connection in mentoring. The worst thing you can do is to make a commitment that you simply cannot honor. Then the mentoree is left to wait – until they decide to eventually pursue another mentor, by which point they've wasted considerable time waiting for you. It is worth the time in your schedule to invest in others, but if you can't, the best thing you can do is to be up front about it.





IV. Barnabas - Accountability Partner

HOW THEY DID IT

Paul was overseeing lots of people in the New Testament and often would issue instruction to them about their conduct and the conduct of those they led. Therefore, we don't get a close glimpse into many of his peers, but Barnabas is a great one to highlight. Paul and Barnabas did ministry together and, for a season, it was very effective.¹⁴ When they partnered for the purpose of the Gospel they were on equal footing and did ministry together in close connection.¹⁵ The challenge for Paul and Barnabas came when Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them and, since John Mark had abandoned them earlier in ministry, they decided to separate for the ultimate good of both.

Interestingly, though, Barnabas wielded influence over Paul in a way that we see few others had. Both moved on to do incredible ministry, but later Paul changed his mind about Barnabas and considered him to be an asset on another ministry trip.¹⁶ We don't get a full picture of the dynamics present in their relationship, but there was definitely a keen sense of brotherhood that they shared and a close connection worth noting – where they both stood their ground well and challenged each other in their ministry together.

We see a clearer picture of this kind of relationship played out between King David and Nathan. After David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and sent her husband back into battle to be killed to cover up the sin, he tried to go back to his normal practices. Nathan, however, empowered by God, presented a very clear situation of theft to David in which David quickly saw and pronounced judgment on the wrongdoer, only to realize that Nathan was using a metaphor to describe David's sin and that he was the offender!¹⁷ This confrontation brought about significant remorse from David and he repented deeply and with sincere guilt over what had happened.¹⁸

The power that is evidenced in the influence we see between Paul and Barnabas, as well as Nathan and David, is available to us as well. They had peers that were walking the road of life like them, but they felt open to challenge each other in the areas where they most needed it. When we can find another person who will challenge us to consider the choices that we are making and help us to live free from the bondage of sin, then we can create awesome spiritual momentum.

Scripture is filled with messages that point us to the level of accountability that is uncomfortable in community, but essential if we want it to work for life and continue to develop over time.¹⁹ If we aim to be a community of faith that

grows wider and deeper, then we must take the words of Scripture seriously and address the things in our midst that are grieving the Holy Spirit.²⁰ Our accountability should have a corporate nature to it, but it can't be fully captured in that sphere.

The biblical examples, like Nathan and Barnabas, are individuals pairing with individuals on similar spiritual plains to help one another in the areas of growth that are needed. Much like a mentoring relationship, it is about a perspective bigger than the immediate situation. But unlike a Paul, a Barnabas helps me to identify the goals I have set for right now and what is at stake in my choices for this season of my life. If my Paul helps me to see the brick wall ahead of me, my Barnabas helps me to not trip on the rock directly in front of me.

HOW WE DO IT

The way to effectively find an accountability partner starts with looking at your peers and finding someone that is on fairly even footing with you, but also someone who wants to grow spiritually and be held accountable to the decisions of faith they have made. The challenges and struggles you have will often be similar, but they don't need to be identical. It actually can help when you are working on different things, because you will see your struggles through the lens of their strength in the same area and vice-versa.

These relationships begin best by building a relationship-base around food or hang out time for a couple of weeks. Then, when schedules are worked out, there is a weekly routine where the two of you meet and spend significant time in recap, prayer and discussion of the previous week and the week ahead. The emphasis can't be on what you can do to muscle your way to a better spiritual life. Rather, it should be on how you can more effectively tap into the grace of God in your lives and experience His peace in the midst of your struggles and sin.

Accountability relationships can become one of two extremes – either it becomes a hang out time with no real purpose and it becomes useless, or it becomes a session of self-improvement where, without the Holy Spirit, you will both be very depressed and disappointed every week. I would make a couple of initial recommendations around how to handle these relationships. First, I would recommend the relationship-base, but also a base of questions that you ask one another each week. Write out questions for the other to ask that are direct and hit the areas that you struggle with the most. Redo this list every six months. Secondly, I would encourage full transparency in areas of struggle. This probably includes software that monitors and shoots updates of any questionable computer activity as well as free reign to each other's email, text messages, Facebook, etc. The more open you can be with one another, the more effective the relationship can be. You will get out of it what you put into it. Be consistent and willing to be challenged in the areas of your personal struggle and need.



V. Timothy - Mentoree

HOW THEY DID IT

Teachability is a huge part of our development as believers and, at our core, we must be characterized by humility. As a young man, Timothy learned from his mom and grandmother about the things of God.²¹ When you think about the cultural ramifications for him as a young man, there would have been a lot of people in his position who would have allowed pride to creep in and who would not have had the humility to learn from these two incredible women that God had put in his life.

Timothy not only listened to the counsel and wisdom of those two women, but also received tutelage from his longtime mentor Paul. Paul wasn't some highly respectable figure; he was a former persecutor of the church and was thought, at the early part of his ministry, to be some sort of spy trying to infiltrate the church.²² With the legacy that Timothy had in his upbringing, he would have had the ability to discard Paul as someone he couldn't learn from, but he looked beyond what others might see to a real value in a truly unique relationship. Scripture doesn't reveal whether Paul pursued Timothy or if Timothy approached Paul, but, either way, the relationship was truly meaningful to both men. The ministry that they each accomplished individually was benefited by their time invested in relationship.²³

A teenager today should consider that Timothy learned the Scriptures when he was young and was already exhibiting the characteristics of a follower of Jesus in his teen years. He didn't wait for others to take him seriously; he took God seriously.

HOW WE DO IT

Finding a mentor can be a difficult process, but it's worth the effort. The more you put in on the front end, the better the relationship will be. There may be systems for you to plug into over time – ministries that pair you up with a mentor – but often you will be responsible for identifying a mentor yourself. You'll need to communicate what you hope to gain through the relationship. I often tell students that, even though a mentor may be difficult to get time with, it's worth being flexible to make consistency happen.

In general, the better the mentor you're seeking, the less available they'll be during "convenient times." I recommend suggesting breakfast times and places that are close to your mentor's work or home. This will help to maximize your time together and help the relationship build momentum. Over time, your relationship will gain traction through consistency and getting to know each

other, but at the outset you need to find someone you respect, who loves Jesus, and do the work to make the partnership happen!

If you're a Timothy, I would encourage you to see the relationship as one in which you derive a proportionate amount from what you invest. Even more than the other relationships listed, you must put time and energy into this one for it to work. I tell people all the time that the better your Paul, the harder it will be to get time with them consistently, but the more valuable that time will be.

Also, to the Timothy wondering what to talk about or what to ask, I would encourage you to ask honest and direct questions of your Paul so you're not wasting your time or theirs. This relationship can be tremendously beneficial if you're willing to be challenged...be willing.





V. Sustaining Biblical Relationships

These relationships are essential components to a growing follower of Jesus, and they can help you to build a faith that grows even when your motivation isn't wanting to. They do require some specific attitudes and behaviors to ensure that they remain a priority in your schedule as well as your life.

There are lots of scheduling challenges that will creep up all the time, but you have to take action to ensure that meeting times happen regularly and are a stress reliever rather than a stress inducer. If you don't have a calendar that you keep, it's time to start. Use a phone, computer or even paper – just find something that works and stick with it. These appointments need to make it onto that calendar and stay largely unchanged by you unless your Paul, Barnabas or Timothy need a change; in which case, try to accommodate them.

As far as frequency is concerned, I would encourage you to meet with your Paul every other week, your Timothy on the off week and your Barnabas every week. These don't have to be rules and it may vary based on season, but don't let any of them go for more than a month. It's important that they stay consistent and that you expect them during your week. It will help you stay accountable.

In regard to your heart-ability to respect and learn from these relationships, I would encourage you to keep a journal that encapsulates all of these relationships. Whether it's your Paul, Barnabas or Timothy, be prepared to learn and write down notes during or after conversations. When you are praying for something, or having something prayed for, monitor it in the journal and discuss it in these relationships. You need to see the value of these relationships over time and that requires a level of detail and intentionality that won't always come naturally.

Lastly and most importantly, in your heart-connection to these relationships, pray regularly for your Paul, Barnabas and Timothy. Pray that God will provide unity of spirit and speak into your heart for what they need to hear from you and vice-versa. This is the most powerful thing you can do in these relationships; it will help you to remain focused on their purpose and point you to the person God is calling you to be.

These relationships have been critical to me, and central to their success has been my consistent refocus on the fact that they are for my benefit. View them as resources and not obligations.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Proverbs 12:15
- 2 Romans 1:21-23
- 3 Proverbs 27:17
- 4 Acts 2:42-47
- 5 Acts 6:1-6
- 6 2 Timothy 2:2
- 7 Luke 4:1-13
- 8 Romans 8:9-11
- 9 Philippians 3:2-11
- 10 Galatians 1:13, 14
- 11 Acts 9:3-9
- 12 1 Timothy 1:2
- 13 Acts 16:1
- 14 Acts 15:2
- 15 Acts 15:35
- 16 2 Timothy 4:11
- 17 2 Samuel 12
- 18 Psalm 53
- 19 Galatians 1:1-6
- 20 Ephesians 4:30
- 21 2 Timothy 1:5
- 22 Acts 8:1-4
- 23 2 Timothy 4:6-8



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