

Jesus' Relationships

Build to Last. Part 1. Sunday 23 April 2023 8am & 10am Service. By Neil Smith.

Introduction

Good morning everyone. Today we are starting a new series called **Build to Last!**

We live in an time where a lot of things seem temporary, and it seems that trend has also begun to affect our relationships. When you consider...

The state of our relationships...

It is not a great story. The world has become a very angry place, where we now have something called **cancel culture**, where we are encouraged to cut people out of our lives if we disagree with them, and to shame and banish them!

According to Stats SA, in 2021, here are some facts about the state of our relationships.

First, some stats about **the state of marriage**:

Interestingly, there are more women (54.8%) than men (33.7%) filing for divorce today. The average ages of divorce in 2021 were 45 years for men, and 41 years for women.

The results show that 4 in every 10 divorces (42.5%) come from marriages that did not reach their 10th wedding anniversary!

Many relationships today are simply not lasting...

But it is not just marriages that are not lasting, many of us today have friendships with people that we have never even met in real life! Let's talk a bit about the...

The state of friendships..

The rise of social media means that we can now communicate with people around the world, and never even actually hear their voice, or see them in real life.

And if at some point we don't like them, we can simply 'unfriend' them, and just move on without them in our lives. Words like 'unfriending' and 'ghosting' have crept into our vocabulary.

With the rise of artificial intelligence, advanced AI has revealed the heartbreaking depth of loneliness in the world, and unveiled the truth of how broken our relationships have really become. Many people have become extremely isolated and crave any kind of connection they can find. Even if its not with a real person.

AI Chatbots, like the Googles *Character.AI* and others like *Replica*, who the designer hoped would serve as a 'supportive friend that would always be there' - something she wished she had when she was younger - are becoming more advanced each day.

These things have become terrifyingly real 'ideal partners' to people. Microsofts, *AI Xiaoice*, appears as a flirty 18 year old girl, and has hooked hundreds of million users already.

And how shocking is this, for just \$70, you can enable a higher tier, and you guessed it, unlock certain erotic role play features for the AI.

Father, would you open people's eyes...

Church, people are so lonely, that they have begun to seek out AI for romantic and even sexual relationships.

These things don't have their own wants or needs! They are not real! But I get it, a relationship with an AI offers all the emotional support that a human partner does, without any of the messy complicated expectations - and human beings are falling in love with them! People are finding themselves deeply emotionally dependant on digital lovers. *Time Magazine: <https://time.com/6257790/ai-chatbots-love/>

The sad reality right now is that the frequency of humans turning to AI to meet their relationship needs is only likely to increase. I believe it is going to lead to massive unpredictable and harmful results. I have no doubt that AI will become helpful in many many ways, but the rise of it will also deepen what many social scientists are already calling an 'epidemic of loneliness.'

For us as Christ followers, its important that we be discerning and wise in these last days. "These things do not think, or feel or need in a way that humans do. But they provide enough of an uncanny replication of that for people to be convinced.

What about our children?

The state of our children...

Also, according to Stats SA, in our country, about one-fifth (21,3%) of children aged 17 years and less, do not live with their parents. That is massive.

And we all know Children need a home. Children need family. They need a nurturing environment. They need Fathers and Mothers to raise them. Not a Government System. Not AI. But people who truly love and care for them.

So, how can we build lasting relationships in this kind of a environment? I believe it is a very relevant issue to talk about. Are relationships even important anymore? Of course they are.

Now rather than beginning this series with a message about marriage or parenting, the traditional relationships that we usually address, and yes, we will address those in the series, I thought it would be good to first look, and ask, how did Jesus conduct His relationships? What can we learn from Jesus about relationships?

Here is the first thing I notice that Jesus teaches us. Love should be the foundation of our interactions;

Jesus calls us to love our friends

In John chapter 15, Jesus gave us a command. Who of you here take the commands of Jesus seriously in your life? Come on Church. Let me see, who of you say Jesus is Lord of my life, and therefore I am committed to obeying his commands? There we go. Well then, here is one of his commands to us;

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. (John 15:12-14 NIV)

Love is a word that we tend to use so easily. I love cheese! I love Mexican food! I love rugby! But the kind of love that Jesus is talking about here, is not an 'easy love' but rather, a 'costly love.' He uses that Greek word for 'sacrificial love.' We know it as? Agape.

Agape love. This sacrificial, unconditional love, is meant to undergird our relationships if we are to model Jesus. So often we live according to our needs and wants, which may be perfectly acceptable and valid, but we tend to put ourselves first, and our sin nature makes us selfish and self-centred.

Jesus challenges us to put others before ourselves, even if it costs us. I don't think He is calling us to be door mats that allow ourselves to be bullied and used, but rather, to live a life of kindness, where we are considerate and aware of other people.

The Apostle Paul echoed this in his letter to the Philippians:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. ⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2:3-4 NIV)

When you think about your relationships – with your spouse, your kids, your friends, your relatives, your work colleagues – is there a foundation of love for that? Are you loving your friends like Jesus calls you to?

Here is the next thing I want you to see.

Jesus picked his close friends wisely

Surveying the life of Jesus, it is insightful to see how he managed so many diverse, complex, and shifting relationships. Jesus took time to pray and to seek the help of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Here are some principles that I can see in scripture that Jesus used when managing his relationships, firstly;

The principle of hospitality

Jesus was friendly to all people, but he was only a close friend to a few people. Much of this is common sense. No one has capacity to be a close friend to everyone, but we are instructed to be hospitable and friendly to everyone.

The Apostle Peter said; **“Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.” (1 Pet 4:9)**

Even as a pastor, I cannot be a close friend to the 1000 people in our church database! But I can be friendly to everyone. It was the same with Jesus. He had many followers, but he only had twelve disciples, and then three really close friends. Peter, James & John. If you want to do relationships like Jesus did, be hospitable and friendly to everyone, but find your own inner circle, of people you can really be close to.

The principle of capacity.

This is linked to the above. Jesus knew that as a human being, he had certain capacities with relationships. Relationships are costly. A close relationship costs time, money, and energy. In scriptures, we read of many many people that Jesus met with, prayed for, taught, and healed, but here is the truth, there is a even longer list of all the people that Jesus did not meet with, pray over, teach or heal.

Now remember also, that Jesus built relationships with people of different backgrounds. This can be really difficult. Don't let your stereotyping and capacity fears stop you from stepping out of your comfort zone. Jesus built relationships with some very unlikely people for a Jewish male! Luke tells us this story;

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd.

⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. ⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” (Luke 19:1-5)

Not a relationship I would have thought Jesus would have been open to! Right? I mean, lets me honest, Zacchaeus was most likely a arrogant little nasty tax collector working for the Romans! But Jesus made time and capacity to reach out to him. A very unlikely relationship. What are the unlikely relationships God has placed in your life?

Jesus spent time with people that society would not have approved of – He shared meals with tax collectors, ate at Simon the lepers house, and in the company of women who were considered to be prostitutes.

Jesus had time for ordinary sinful people like you and I. We are not told of the great teachings Jesus shared at these encounters. I'm sure Jesus spoke of God's love and

His Kingdom with these people, because that is who Jesus was. But it also speaks volumes to me, that this is where Jesus spent His time, and spent time in their homes.

You and I both have certain capacities. In your relationships, accept that, and work within that, but be brave to also make time for people who are different to you, and who God may have placed in your life for a reason.

The principle of priority.

Now although Jesus reached out to people like Zacchaeus, Jesus also knew his priorities. Jesus had many followers, many friends, but we also know that Jesus had his inner circle of close friends, three disciples, plus a few friends and perhaps his family got the majority of his personal time and energy. Shelley is my wife, and my best friend. She is my most loyal supporter, my lover, and she is my priority. I'm committed to her like she is committed to me. We can count on each other to be there for each other. Priority. Which are your priority relationships. Are you looking after those? Are you protecting those?

The principle of seasonality.

When I lived in PE. I had a few really close friends. Some moved away. I moved away. Some took a different path in life. I began as a graphic designer, and ended up a pastor! Most relationships in life are seasonal. Few are for life. I've lost touch with a lot of those people.

It was the same with Jesus. He grew up with people from a small town, but we don't hear much more about those people in his later life. I have a very close friend, called Andrew, who despite the fact that he now lives in the Netherlands, still remains a dear friend, and we have become even closer over the years. Some friendships are life-long, and some friendships are just seasonal, and that's okay.

As a pastor I have had to learn this. I've had to learn that even in our church family, some people are going to come and go. As a shepherd I am going to have some people move away. A colleague once told me this; "Neil, God calls some people to you, for life, and sometimes he calls some people through you, just for a season. Don't take it personally."

The principle of safety.

When it comes to picking close friends. You've got to be wise. Jesus was wise. Some people are not safe. There are a lot of people around us that are not safe. They are not safe to be around. They are not safe to allow your kids to be around.

King Solomon said it best: **"Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." (Proverbs 4:23).**

This is necessary for many reasons, but essentially because your heart is extremely valuable, and we don't guard worthless things.

When it comes to people, we should love all, but trust only a few. Love is of course free. But trust is earned. Jesus loved everyone, but did not trust everyone. People trusted Jesus, but Jesus did not trust all people. Some of us have trusted people, and we have been hurt or betrayed. Jesus loved Judas, but he never trusted him. Make sure you have safe relationships.

The principle of honesty.

Healthy relationships don't happen because people are perfect, but because people are truthful and honest with each other. Sometimes you have to have a real talk. You have to define or redefine a relationship.

Jesus did not avoid conflict. Jesus was not afraid to speak the truth nor of offending people. Luke records the words of Jesus to the Pharisees;

“Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. ⁴⁰ You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? ⁴¹ But now as for what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you. (Luke 11:39-41)

Jesus was not afraid to speak the truth nor of offending people. It was perhaps not the best way to make friends, but Jesus did not come for a popularity contest. In many relationships I can see the impact of unspoken truth or of when someone compromises on their faith in order to maintain a peaceful relationship.

Jesus has these kind of talks with his disciple and friend, Peter. Jesus also had a talk with Judas, and he had to end that relationship, because Judas was overtly evil. Church, if you can't be honest, its not healthy. Likewise, you can't live with unforgiveness in or bitterness towards others, as far as it is possible, live at peace.

Jesus also encouraged us in our relationships, to avoid being being reactionary and quick tempered;

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ ³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹ If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.” (Matthew 5:38-41)

Friends, lets be honest and kind in our relationships. Here is the last one;

The principle of health.

I know that as Christians, we develop relationships in order to reach people, and this is good, but you have to be wise. And truthfully, sometimes you come to a point where you have to simply ask, is this relationship life-giving? Where is this relationship heading, up, or down?

Some relationships continuously drain us, like a leech, and they are just filled with constant problems. Now, granted, you can't walk out on a spouse whenever you are

facing some issue, but that's different. Healthy relationships are life-giving. They build one another up. They are life-giving. Not life-sucking!

Now, I also want to say this. I know that some of you have battled to make friends. You've been lonely. You want people in your life, you need people in your life, but you don't know how to go about it. Can I give you some advice someone gave to me a long time ago? If you want to make a good friend, first be a good friend! Begin by becoming that friend to others, that you long for them to be to you, and in time, you will often find some genuine good friends through doing that. Why? Because what you sow, you will ...? Reap. That's it.

Some people are also their own worst enemy. Expecting too much from others. Expecting people to be perfect. Writing people off if they have made the smallest mistake. Some people push people away because they are so easily offended. Jesus would say - its time to learn to walk in truth and grace. No one is perfect. If you want a perfect friend - you're never going to find one. Not on this side of eternity.

So, which of these principles is the most helpful and makes the most sense when thinking about your own relationships?

But here is the next thing I want you to see, because relationships are not just about what we can get out of them, it should be about what we can invest and give;

Jesus invested in people

If you look at the life of Jesus, you will see how he gathered around Himself, a group of men and women, who did life with him! He travelled with them and spent time with them. He ate with them. He went on long walks with them. He taught them. We of course know them as the disciples. Luke writes;

Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, ² and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases:

Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; ³ Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means. (Luke 8:1-3 NIV)

Jesus did life with people, and he invested in people. Friends, don't fall into the trap of being labelled a introvert, Jesus was relational by nature, and no matter where you fall on the worlds way of describing your personality, we are all made to be relational - and to do life with one another.

The disciples had different backgrounds, ranging from fishermen, tax collectors, to financially independent women. What they had in common, was a love for Jesus, and a desire to be with Him and learn from Him. Jesus did not actually need disciples – it was a choice of His - and I suppose He did this on purpose to set up the

way for the church and the spread of the Gospel after His resurrection. But for the miracles and teaching the crowds, Jesus was perfectly able to do that Himself. But Jesus is relational by nature – always moving towards people and loving them. We should be the same.

In Matthew we are shown little details like how Jesus confided in his friends;

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.”³⁷ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled.³⁸ Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” (Matthew 26:36-38)

Jesus confided and shared His deep emotional feelings with these disciples and trusted them in a difficult time, and if you remember, they actually him down – they feel asleep instead of praying and staying with Him. But I love the grace that Jesus showed them even at that time:

When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy.⁴⁴ So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.⁴⁵ Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. (Matthew 26:43)

Church, if Jesus needed to depend on friends - don't for one second believe you don't. Let's do life with each other. Invest in one another's lives. Build relationships that we can count on.

Aside from the disciples whom Jesus purposefully taught and invested into, Jesus also had other people who were His friends;

Jesus cared for His friends

Do you remember the story of Lazarus? Lazarus, one of Jesus' friends was sick. John writes;

³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.”⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. (John 11:1-5)

If you remember this story, Jesus delayed going to Lazarus, and he ended up dying – Jesus would then raise him from the dead, but still, when hearing of his friends death from the sisters, we read this. One of the shortest verses in scripture. Just two words, but so powerful; John simply says;

³⁵ Jesus wept. (John 11:35)

Just two words, but deep truth. Jesus had real friendships and people that He cared for – it was not all about ministry and doing a job. Just like Jesus, God has created us to be relational, because God Himself is relational.

Do you have friends that you care for? Do you have friends that care for you? If not, perhaps its time to take a risk - and to reach out, make a change, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life, but every relationship involves the risk of getting hurt, it never stopped Jesus, it should not stop us.

One or two more points - here's the next one;

Jesus redefined family

I have always been fascinated by Jesus' family dynamics. I mean, you know what brothers can be like! Can you imagine what it must have been like to be a part of that family! There are a few interactions we see with Jesus and His biological family, but here is the amazing thing I want you to see, Jesus redefined what was meant by family. Look at what Matthew wrote;

While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you."

⁴⁸ He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹ Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matthew 12:46-50)

I'm hope that if you've been a part of King of Kings for a little while, that you've begun to experience this - Family does not have to be all about biology. Amen?!

God has placed us in a church family – the people sitting around you are your brothers and sisters in faith. So if you have no family, or you are estranged from your family, Jesus reminds us, that family is about faith not blood. Well, it's his blood that makes us family.

Now, I am not saying this is an excuse to abandon your families. Some cults do this, and it is unbiblical. Biological family is still important. Jesus did not abandon his family responsibilities even as He hung on the cross! John writes;

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," ²⁷ and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. (John 19:25-27)

Jesus redefined family. So should we.

Conclusion

So how is it going with your relationships?

I hope that you will use this series that we are working through to give yourself a relationship audit. We all know that we cannot change other people, but we are responsible for our actions, reactions and behaviours. So, I want you to be asking yourself if you are doing what you need to be doing to build lasting relationships.

From Jesus' example, do you have relationships with people in the church family to do ministry and service together – are you investing in those relationships to build the Kingdom of God? Do you show care and love in your close friendships? Do you care for your church family and take care of your biological family responsibilities? How do you deal with truth, conflict and how is your temper? Are you limited in your friendships or are their people you need to be sitting down at a table with? God has created you to be relational – what areas do you need to grow and work on? What is a next step that God might be calling you to? Do you need to join a small group? Do you need to start serving on a team where you can get to know some new people? Anything Jesus wants you to be sorting out with someone in your life? Jesus said;

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command.

Let's pray.

Father, thank you for your word. Thank you for the example of Jesus. Thank you Holy Spirit for pointing out things that you want to work on. Help us to love each other, as you have loved us. Help us to make strong healthy life-long friendships that are life-giving, and God glorifying. Help us to model healthy relationships for our children. Help us to have an attitude like you, where we are willing to lay down our lives for our friends, as you did for us on the cross Jesus.

And Jesus we thank you that for those who have accepted you, as Lord and saviour, that you no longer call us servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, you have called us your friends, for everything that you learnt from your Father, you have made known to us. We love you Lord. Amen.

Small Group Questions

1. What challenges do you face in building lasting meaningful relationships, especially in the age we live in?
2. God has created us to be relational. What characterises a godly relationship – whether marriage, friendship, parent, colleague etc?
3. Looking at Jesus' family relationships how does He redefine what family is? How does that translate to our lives?
4. What principles can we learn from Jesus that are foundational to our friendships and other relationships?

5. What are you investing into your relationships and why – what changes do you think you could make to build relationships that last?