

THE RELATIONSHIP CYCLE

SUPERFICIAL



GATHER INFORMATION



ACCEPTED



VULNERABILITY



REJECTED



SELF-DISCLOSURE



SHUT DOWN



KNOWN



IMPENETRABLE



AGAPE LOVE



OTHER-DISCLOSURE

2 CORINTHIANS 6:11-13

UNITY

JOHN 17: 20-23

SUPERFICIAL

EFFECTIVE
WITNESS

ROMANS 15: 5,6

GOD'S KINGDOM GROWS

JOHN 13: 34,35

We were made for relationship. It's not even a fuzzy, unclear, debatable issue. And I know this because God said so. There. Can't argue with that, can you? Well, you can, but you'll lose ... every time.

From the beginning of time, God said it was not good for us to be alone. (Genesis 2:18)

So He gave us relationship. I'm confident that much of what we're to gain and learn and experience in relationships is to aid us in mirroring the kind of connection God wants with us. He shows us glimpses of himself through those he puts in our lives. Which also means that you get to be a tangible expression of God's love for people in your life. Wow. What a cool, even overwhelming, reality!

So, before we delve into a deep discussion about relationships, it's only fair that I let you know from the get-go that I'm an expert in them. I'm not bragging: the dictionary says an expert is "a person who has special skill or knowledge in some particular field."¹ Being the middle child of five girls automatically gave me a head start when it comes to relationship experience. I also played team sports through high school, which aided in my learning how to "play well with others." I went to a small Christian college where, literally, everyone knew my name. Some people would hate that kind of environment but I thrived there and developed life-long friendships. I have been in 23 weddings, which should get me some kind of award (other than dresses that "I'll wear again, for sure!") And as of today, I apparently have 1174 "friends" on Facebook. But I digress.

BFF

What used to be how we jokingly signed a yearbook has become a common cultural label today: best friends forever. Only we usually have more than one “best,” so the whole thing doesn’t really make sense. But humor me: think of the first BF you can recall. Got it? Now think of what that friendship was based on.

My first best friend was Frieda Star. I’m not kidding, that was her name. Anyway, what made Frieda my BF? We lived on the same block and were the same age. That’s it: the ever-lasting bond of location and age proximity. Needless to say, we parted ways when our geographic bond dissolved (I moved away.) But I’m convinced moving away was a God-send because we were quickly heading toward delinquency in our friendship, as we seemed to like lighting things on fire and carving up the neighbor’s trees with kitchen knives.

So what makes for a truly long-lasting “best” friendship? (I propose that location and age are actually the least important factors.) The variables that seem to contribute to truly deep friendship are a mix of shared interests, shared values, similar sense of humor, commitment, loyalty and, if you’re really fortunate, kindred spirits. For the sake of simplicity, I define a kindred spirit as one of those people with whom you just click: it’s unexplainable and it’s also a treasure to stumble upon one or more of these in your lifetime! (Some may use the term “soul mate” but that sounds goofy to me, so I won’t.)

Why is it that, even from a young age, we yearn to belong, to relate with someone, to be in the “in” crowd, to be known, to have a best friend? (Or a few bests?)

THE GENESIS OF RELATIONSHIP

We truly were made for relationship. I love when I discover verses in the Bible that affirm this truth. Passages like James 2:23, where we see that Abraham was called “friend of God.” (How cool is that?!) But rewind to the beginning and see how this whole relationship thing started:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him. (Gen 1: 26-27)

This was the beginning of vertical relationships: God and man. But now, fast-forward to Genesis chapter 2, where God tells us it wasn’t good for man to be alone ... so He made him a helper. Thus, horizontal relationships began on earth. (I say “on earth” because the Trinity is the ultimate, eternal horizontal relationship - Father, Son and Holy Spirit interacting in a perfect relational bond.)

Sadly, it didn’t take long for both the vertical and horizontal relationships to be screwed up because of that fateful day when Adam and Eve had an apple-fest in the garden. And it’s been downhill ever since because we’ve been trying to get back to the perfect, untainted, completely fulfilling relationship with God which we were created to enjoy but were hindered by the lingering effects of the Fall; namely, the stubborn self-will known as sin.

We were made for relationship. That’s what makes Christianity unique - the God we worship wants a personal relationship with us! Christianity isn’t about a bunch of rules - it’s about a relationship with our Creator and with each other. And only Jesus can enable this to happen, redeeming us and restoring what God intended.

SECTION A: THE BIG PICTURE

Several years ago, while working with a bible study of college-aged girls, I discovered that vulnerability cannot be assumed in friendships. Here's what happened: I would meet with each girl and talk about her struggles, successes, boy stuff ... whatever. Usually these were pretty personal and intimate times as they openly shared their lives with me. Then I would guide them through a biblical perspective of how to pursue God and grow through these challenges. One night in our bible study group, I asked the group to go around and share their response to some question I asked that was deeper than "What's your favorite flavor of ice cream?" The problem was that they wouldn't go deeper than that. I was dumbfounded. Each of them had shared personal things with me earlier that week that would have been totally relatable in the group, but it was as if they all had brain-freeze during our group time (hence the ice-cream question may have been better). They just wouldn't "go there."

I was mad. That night, or rather, early the next morning, I woke up really bothered by the lack of openness and vulnerability in the group. I started journaling and processing my frustration and the next thing I knew, I had come up with a model I called "The Relationship Cycle" and have used it in 20 years of ministry and friendship ever since.

As I've utilized this model over the years, my heart's desire has been not only that it would help people go deeper in their relationships, but that as a result of Christ-followers pursuing and loving each other as Jesus has asked us to, the world would see a difference when they see us. That as they observe our "supernatural" interactions and care for

each other, they would want to be a part of these kind of relationships and ultimately the relationship that matters more than any other; the one with their Creator!

Check out the diagram. I've used this in a variety of situations: from one-on-one to a small group to a large group, like a church retreat or a student meeting on campus. With an individual, I'll talk through it and then ask her to point out where she is "stuck" in the cycle and why. This has stimulated some life-changing conversations, for which I've been so grateful!

That night when the Lord woke me up to put all of this together, He reminded me of the passage that tells us we're made in his image (Genesis 1:27). It occurred to me that if we really were made in his image, some things were true of us that I hadn't thought of before.

We have the privilege of learning something very intimate about God in Jeremiah 9:24, where the Lord tells us that if a man is going to boast about anything, that it not be about his wisdom, or his strength or even his possessions - but that it be about understanding and knowing God. A few chapters later, He says something extremely important: "I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord..." (Jeremiah 24:7)

So that night in my groggy state of mind, a concept became crystal clear to me: since we are made in God's image, and He values being known more than anything else, it stands to reason that it is very important to us as humans to also be known. Obviously we want to be known by God, but it also became clear to me that we have a high need to be known by others here on earth. There is something in us that makes us want to belong, to be known and to be

understood. We are made for relationship, which is a gift from God. Let's examine the Relationship Cycle and unwrap this gift.

SUPERFICIALITY: Here is where it all begins. Every relationship starts off on a superficial or shallow level; you don't really know her and she doesn't really know you. You meet, you say hi and you move on - unless one of you takes it to the next level. Many of our daily interactions with people may take place in this level. But if you don't go to the next level in any relationship and you choose to stay superficial with all people, you will be a very isolated and lonely person. This is not what God intends ... remember Genesis 2:18? It was not good then - and it's not good now - for man to be alone!

Let's move to the next level of relationships: ***GATHERING INFORMATION*** is when you ask people questions in order to collect facts about them, like where they are from, what they do, where they went to school, their marital status, etc. Most of us have a lot of relationships at this level - basically acquaintances.

As you learn more about someone and sense a connection, you are set up to progress into the next level: ***VULNERABILITY***. This was originally a military term, meaning "able to be wounded/hurt." When a city's walls were strong and fortified, there was no fear of the enemy getting through. But when any part of the wall (their outward protection) became "vulnerable," the city's residents were likely to suffer harm.

Vulnerability is the willingness to open yourself up to another person. At this stage, you aren't just offering facts to another person but you are choosing to share how you

feel about something or someone. Being vulnerable requires constant risk because you are putting something about yourself "out there," with no guarantee of how it will be received. I believe it's our responsibility as Christians to be vulnerable with each other and to have deep relationships that pursue truly knowing each other. This is a choice we make and the more we choose it, the more we know what it looks and feels like!

This level is where the flow of relationships splits into one of two outcomes: when you choose to be vulnerable - to open up, to let down your "protective walls," to risk with someone - you will either feel accepted or rejected.

REJECTION: What makes us feel rejected when we share something personal? We may get laughed at, criticized, rejected, ignored, shamed, etc ... So the natural response when we've been rejected is to . . .

SHUT DOWN: we don't like this feeling of rejection so we decide then and there that we will NEVER go there again with that person (or people). In choosing this response over and over again, we will become ...

IMPENETRABLE: we tend to build walls against people when they've hurt us. But if we do this too much and with too many people, guess what? We'll stay ...

SUPERFICIAL: which means we remain in a state of loneliness and isolation. This is not God's will; He made us for relationship.

Sadly, when someone decides (and it is a decision), to live like this, they tend to live a bitter, lonely, sad existence.

And, if this continues for a long time, they will usually develop a hardened heart. How can I say that? I didn't. God did. Hebrews 3:13 states, "But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." We need each other! One reason we need relationships is because we need encouragement to keep us from being calloused by sin.

ACCEPTANCE: This is the other possible outcome of vulnerability. When we share something personal and it is received with attentive listening, sincere questions, good eye contact, and shared emotion, we feel the safety of offering more. We took a relational risk and it's now paying off by bringing us into closer relationship with another.

When we feel accepted, this causes us to offer more **SELF-DISCLOSURE**: we share with more depth and meaning, like our hopes, our fears, our desires - significant things that reveal our true selves. We make statements like, "I feel ... I think ... I am ..." And this leaves us feeling more **KNOWN & UNDERSTOOD**. Now we're back to the seed, the underlying cause of this entire process! We are made in God's image and He speaks very specifically about the significance of knowing Him. So it stands to reason that we, as humans made in His image, also place a high value on being known. As we feel known and understood by another, we experience what the Bible calls, **AGAPE LOVE**. This is a love with no strings attached. It's a love that doesn't say, "I love you if ..." but says, "I love you, period." Agape is not based on anything we do or don't do - it's unconditional.

As we experience this kind of love, we set others up for **OTHER-DISCLOSURE**. They open up about themselves - it's a two-way process to be truly vulnerable. They see how messed up and broken we are, so they feel more free and

able to risk sharing things about themselves. Vulnerability encourages vulnerability (2 Corinthians 6:11-13). And one of the results of this shared vulnerability is a lack of judgment: "Here I am, the good, the bad and the ugly, and I am in no place to judge you for what's going on in your life." Accepted vulnerability means we both move towards each other without the fear of one running the other way. This takes time and is a risk because not all people know how to do this. But as we take the risk and our vulnerability is well-received, we experience trust and safety in a way that allows us to see a glimpse of God in that person. I promise, that's a really cool thing.

As others feel known and understood, they also experience *AGAPE LOVE*, which leads to more self-disclosure, thus creating a cycle of relationships that are deep and meaningful and supernatural. I envision this as two gears: one gear is the Body of Christ and as we grow and experience true unity we influence the second gear, which is the world. Our relationships turn the gear of non-believers when they see our *UNITY/BONDING/INTIMACY* (John 17:20-23).

Because of our loving interaction with each other, we Christ-followers set ourselves up to be *EFFECTIVE WITNESSES* (Romans 15:5,6; Acts 2:42,47). And because of our *UNITY* drawing others to Christ, *GOD'S KINGDOM GROWS* (John 13:34,35).

And, ultimately, this is what we're really here for anyway, isn't it? God left us here on this earth to reach more and more lost people by displaying, demonstrating, and declaring the power of life-changing vertical and horizontal relationships. Healthy, Christ-focused relationships bring God glory.

You may notice how this Relationship Cycle I've just described begins on a personal, one-on-one level but leads to a much bigger picture. I just want to reiterate that life is not about you. It's not about me. It's about you and me pursuing a relationship that honors and reflects God in us and results in a magnetic and appealing way of life. All of this is not about relationships for the sake of relationships. Jesus himself prayed for us (John 17) and I, personally, long to be an answer to his prayer.

We are made for relationship. With each other, but ultimately with a God so personal that He sacrificed the most treasured relationship He had with his only Son so that we could really know Him.

SECTION B: RELATIONAL SNAPSHOT

Looking at the big picture of the relationship cycle hopefully motivates you to dive in and intentionally pursue friendships of depth. I am forever grateful for the treasured friendships God has put in my life. I don't ever want to take those for granted because of the time (and often trial and error) it took to build them. Yes, you read that right: build them. A God-honoring, deep friendship does not just happen. Friendships of depth take work. It's worth it though - I promise!

In my 24 years of doing ministry with women, I have observed a few common truths about female friendships. Female friendships are invaluable! You will always need the friendships of women - even when you're married. (If you're a guy reading this, please realize I'm not addressing you in this paragraph!) Find me a healthy marriage and I'll bet you'll find a woman who has good girlfriends. Notice I said a healthy marriage. But that's not our topic right now.

I have been blessed with a number of “best” friends over my life. For a long time, I refused to use the label “best” because I saw that God provided so many different friends for different aspects of my life. But in my 30s, I finally gave in and actually started calling my friend, Shannon, my best friend because God had crafted a truly special connection between us. Shannon and I both “get” each other. But the ironic part of our friendship is that we are polar opposites! She’s skinny, I’m not; she’s a thinker, I’m a talker; she’s a runner, I’m a sitter; she’s competitive, I just wanna have fun; she’s blond, I’m brown; she’s deliberate, I’m drastic. And now, she has sex and I don’t - because she’s married and I’m single! We are so different but we see God growing us and changing us as we continue to learn from each other in those differences. Proverbs 27:17, “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another,” has taken on significant meaning to us over the years.

Shannon and I love each other enough to speak into each other’s lives; even if it’s hard to hear. A phrase we coined in the beginning of our friendship was “Delighting in the differences!” We used to say it laughing and really delighting in how different we are. And now, with more knowledge of the frustrations that are inherent in relational differences, we often say it through clenched teeth! But that’s what loving by faith looks like, doesn’t it? That’s what agape love is really about: “I love you, period. In spite of the differences - and even the things about you that drive me crazy.”

RELATIONAL PILLARS

Since God made us for a relationship with Him, I think it’s the coolest thing that He chooses to tangibly show us His love, care, and concern through the people He puts in our

lives. As I've experienced my own friendships and observed many other female friendships, I have noticed some common "foundations" that contribute to building and supporting a successful friendship. We'll call these "pillars:" strong, supportive, and foundational. These are essential elements in the architecture of friendships, giving solid support to withstand the challenges that come along. Of course there are probably dozens of other factors that contribute to building a healthy friendship, but the following seem to be the most consistent and crucial.

Pillar #1: Communication

Depth makes all the difference in a good friendship. Let me explain with an illustration I'll refer to as "relational water sports." We'll use water-skiing, snorkeling and scuba diving as our comparisons.

When you're water-skiing, you're flying along on the surface of the water and getting a fun, exciting experience. But you don't have the time to really stop and enjoy the scenery. However, snorkeling is a whole different experience than water skiing. Now you look below the surface and you see things you couldn't see at all from above the water. You see fish and various sea creatures as you allow the current to take you where it goes. Next up is scuba diving. (And honestly, it is beyond me why humans want to do something that God obviously didn't intend for us to do since you have to strap on a huge air tank to continue living, not to mention weights to hold you down there! I can't breathe just thinking about it.) I'm told that when one scuba dives, an entirely different world opens up and the experience is breath-taking (which is pretty dangerous because you really do need your breath down there!) As you submerge dozens of feet underwater, you can see fish and plants that are full

of colors we rarely see above the surface. It's apparently an amazing experience, but one that takes a lot more effort than just floating along the surface.

Let's compare these three activities with our communication experiences in friendships. "Water-skiing" is when you basically stay at a surface level with your friend. You have fun together and share laughs and relate together about things you do but that's as far as it goes. There's nothing wrong with this level of communication. But honestly, you'll long for more eventually. I know I do.

Then we have "snorkeling:" going a little deeper with your friend as you share things together beyond just fun experiences. Now you're exploring thoughts and feelings as you test the waters of vulnerability. You get to see things in your friendship you didn't see when you just stayed on the surface, and a meaningful relationship is forming.

With continued acceptance, trust and safety, this friendship can take a "scuba diving" adventure! This is when you really "go there," to a level of depth that is truly meaningful and life changing. You both trust each other with things you don't tell just anyone. Vulnerability and intimacy become a shared experience, which allows you to bond in a way that leads to the sharpening and honing of your character and maturity. This can only happen with someone who loves you enough to tell you hard things, as well as life-giving things. It's in the "scuba diving" of communication that you see God love you through someone else. We need to take the scary risk of this communication level if we want to experience what God intends for our relationships. I say "scary" because sometimes becoming known by another isn't always easy! It's not all that fun to have your sin and yuck be exposed ... but we put those "weights" on to hold

us down there so we can experience that unconditional love that makes us grow and become more like Christ - the ultimate scuba diving instructor!

Having this kind of communication is very challenging to do through Facebook or texting! But that's a topic for another time. "Scuba-diving" will usually occur in person, although there certainly are exceptions to this now that we can see each other over our phones and computers. Being able to deeply connect with a friend is crucial in experiencing a strong friendship - we need people in our lives we can "go deep" with and know it's safe. Which brings us to the next pillar.

Pillar #2: Vulnerability

As I mentioned when explaining the relationship cycle, the word vulnerability is an old military term, which means, "able to be wounded." I'd like to expound on that. It's important to see the difference between being transparent and being vulnerable.

For whatever reasons, our culture now places a high value on transparency. It has seemingly become cool to talk about our struggles. (Need proof? Just watch basic cable.) But I think this airing of our dirty laundry is often mistaken for vulnerability. A window is transparent: We can see a tree outside, but guess what? We can't fully experience the tree. We're able to make several observations about it, but we can't touch it, hear it, smell it or taste it. (Why anyone would taste a tree is beyond me. Unless there was maple syrup flowing out of it.)

Being vulnerable takes risk. When you are vulnerable with someone, you are allowing her to experience you, to really know you. Being vulnerable is taking the risk to share

something about yourself that is deeper than just how your day was! It's more about something at your core that's key to who you are or how you feel about something.

I'll allow you to peek into what this looks like in my friendship with Shannon. In the beginning of our friendship, we became experts at "water-skiing" together as we laughed our heads off about everything. We shared a kindredness that I can only describe as God-given. But we took it to "scuba diving" when I sheepishly approached her knowing I needed to get some sin "into the light" as I confessed a number of my struggles to her (I John 1:7). I had no idea what Shannon would do with this confession but she moved toward me in such a gracious, non-judgmental and accepting way, I knew our friendship was solid. That day I took a risk that was met by empathy and unconditional love and acceptance. Over the years, this has been a two-way process. It never ceases to amaze me that when I experience this from Shannon or any friend, I'm getting the slightest glimpse of the unfathomable love and acceptance of God!

And here's the cool thing - when you have a friend you can be vulnerable with, you are set up perfectly for the 3rd pillar.

Pillar #3: Freedom

This means the freedom to be who you are and for your friend to be who she is, not who you may need each other to be. For example, Shannon and I have very different temperaments. She has a phlegmatic temperament (laid back, even-keeled, stable) and I'm sanguine (excitable, hyper, talkative). I am a verbal processor and she is an internal processor, which means I need to talk to figure

things out and that she needs to think (in silence) to figure things out. That's a recipe for disaster if we don't give each other the freedom to be who we are!

It is really hard not to just expect what I want from Shannon (her thoughts, feelings, opinions) to be readily available. But I have learned that she'll talk when she's ready and it's impossible to get her to do so one minute sooner than that! Whereas, she has learned to pull ideas out of me (because when they're stuck in my head, it's dangerous!) So often, she'll push me until I get my thoughts fully verbalized, but if I try to push her - TROUBLE! This is where the freedom to be who we are comes in: I have to be patient while she thinks and she has to be patient while I babble! But she has promised me over the years that she will close the loop and come back to whatever topic/issue she needs time to figure out in her mind - and she actually does! So I trust her to come back to it and I choose to be patient in the meantime. She also is extremely patient with me when she has to just listen to me go on and on about something until I figure out what I'm actually thinking. Delighting in the differences!

Pillar #4 Agape Love

One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." (Matthew 22:35-37) The "love" Jesus describes in the above passage is agape: unconditional love. Jesus told us to agape love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind. I was so intrigued to learn (in my NIV study notes) the difference between the Greek words agape and phileo - phileo love is just friendly affection (Philadelphia is the City of Brotherly Love). But "agape love is the commitment of devotion that is directed

by the will and can be commanded as a duty!"² Jesus knew that sometimes we weren't going to feel like loving God or people and that sometimes we would have to choose with our will to do so.

In my opinion, that's why Gary Chapman's concept "The Five Love Languages" has been so popular over the years.³ People are discovering the specific ways in which they want to be loved and the ways significant others need to be loved; which often don't match at all! For example, Shannon's love language is quality time and mine is words of affirmation. I encourage you to look these up for a deeper understanding, but what this means for us is that she feels the intentionality in my love towards her when I spend quality time with her. If she moves beyond her comfort zone (since affirming words don't come naturally to her) and shares life-giving words with me, I know she's loving me from a love generated by the Lord.

It's critical to remember that loving others often means we choose to do so in ways that communicate love to them (speaking their language) regardless of what we need.

Let me just say, this kind of love is impossible without the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what we call "supernatural," because in and of ourselves, drawing on our own power, we can't love unconditionally. Often we must choose to love someone by faith because we don't feel it. That's okay, that's what the Holy Spirit does through us!

RELATIONAL PITFALLS

Hopefully looking at the "support pillars" of friendships is encouraging and helpful to you. When I was thinking of a concept that was the opposite of a pillar, I came up with a

pitfall. Not only because it's a clever use of alliteration (non-English majors may want to look that up) but also because when I think of the word pitfall, I envision an old movie where someone is being chased through a thick forest and suddenly, out of nowhere, they fall into a camouflaged pit and become captive to the chaser.

I firmly believe we are being chased by an enemy (Satan) who doesn't want us to have God-honoring relationships (see relationship cycle), so he sets up pitfalls: dangerous and all-too-common traps that can ruin friendships if we don't recognize them before we fall into them!

1. Manipulation

In the same way that it seems many males have a sports gene, I think many females have a manipulation gene! It just seems like we are innately good at manipulation - especially guilt manipulation. Sadly, our first experience of this tends to come from our mothers. (Of course not my experience ... I mean, come on, she's reading this!) You could say it's hereditary: sin was passed down to us in our DNA and we'll struggle with it until we get to see Jesus face to face!

Often manipulation is most noticeable in the tone we use. Maybe you've heard something like this: "Well, I guess I'll just go by myself even though I am tired and could possibly crash on the way. But don't worry about me - I'll be okay." It's also possible to be manipulative without using words at all, the most common form being passive aggressive nonverbal communication. For example, your roommate's dirty dishes have piled up AGAIN and you're sick of it but you don't say anything. Instead, you just pile them all up on her bed.

We women are just naturals at saying things to get what we want. This is a very dangerous trait to have in a friendship - and you are the only one who can control it! First and foremost, you need to carefully watch your own tone and choice of words. A good rule of thumb is simply to say what you mean and mean what you say - don't force people to read between the lines in order to connive and exploit them into giving you what you want. But, when it comes to manipulation, don't let others get away with it, either. I have actually had to teach others a phrase I've learned to say to people in my own life, "I really don't respond well to manipulation or guilt balls!" There are some people who are just so masterful at manipulation, that it can feel like they are just throwing one "guilt ball" after another at you! You can emotionally put your hand up and refuse to be hit by them! People in my life soon realize that they won't get far with me using that tactic and hopefully it doesn't stay a part of our relationship.

Many people have to un-learn this since it's so entrenched in many of our relationships, usually starting with our experiences at home. One of the only ways to un-learn manipulation is to be involved in godly, healthy, loving relationships who reveal to you the unhealthy wiring you probably didn't even know is there. This is another reason why it's crucial to have friends in our lives who can speak the truth to us in love!

2. Expectations

I used to teach that expectations were always wrong and would get you in trouble in your friendships. Then I heard someone say, "Expectations are delayed resentment." So I looked up the definition of expectation: "a confident belief or strong hope that a particular event will happen." The

synonyms for it are hope, anticipation, belief, prospect, probability. These all sound like nice words!

So after discovering what expectation really means, I don't see any reason why it would be wrong to have hope or belief or anticipation in friendships. As a matter of fact, I think it's impossible not to have them. It seems like there has to be a degree of expectation that is necessary for a good friendship. With that in mind, I obviously disagree with my former teaching that expectations are always wrong! I think what is more accurate is that unrealistic or unspoken expectations will lead to resentment and disappointment. We tend to have unspoken expectations like, "She should've just known that's what I needed!" But having understood and agreed-upon expectations should lead to healthy friendships. And this just reinforces the importance of the 1st Pillar, Communication. You have to talk these things out!

3. Jealousy

Jealousy means, "fear of being replaced." In friendships, this will stifle and suffocate a relationship quicker than anything. I've never been a jealous person ... until Shannon started dating her husband, Marc! This was a strange new feeling for me as I experienced that definition first-hand: I feared Marc was replacing me.

During this tumultuous time, I came across a helpful article by Dawn Sundstrom which said this:

No matter how silently jealousy creeps into the heart, left untreated it infects relationships and leaves behind broken hearts ... Jealousy distorts your perspective, locking all your attention on another person's blessing instead of your own. 4

She suggested doing the following in order to deal with jealousy that inevitably shows up in relationships: 1) Confess it as sin; 2) Rejoice with her; 3) Reject comparison; and 4) Choose gratitude.

This was extremely beneficial to me in my acceptance of Marc into Shannon's life. I had to confess my sin - that I was jealous or envious; I had to choose by faith to rejoice with her; I had to reject - not allow - those feelings to consume me; I had to choose by faith to be grateful for what God was providing for her and for me. The fact that our relationship has remained so solid over the last eight years of her marriage is a testament to our commitment to maintain friendship in spite of barriers like distance and marriage. I am so grateful for her devotion to me and for Marc's value of friendships in his wife's life!

4. Gossip

Closely related to the manipulation gene is the gossip gene. We females tend to be really good at this very damaging activity!

I researched the folk-etymology of the word gossip and loved what I found! It connects the word "gossip" with "to sip." Politicians would send assistants to bars to sit and listen to general public conversations. The assistants had instructions to sip a beer and listen to opinions; they responded to the command to "go sip" which allegedly turned into "gossip." Isn't that hilarious? Nothing like adding some alcohol to help a story's accuracy!

Interestingly, the last pillar is exactly the opposite of this last pitfall...you can't agape love someone and choose

gossip - they just don't go together. Here's a paraphrase from Paul's "love chapter" of his first letter to the Corinthians: "If you really love someone you will be loyal to her no matter what the cost. You will always believe in her, think the best of her, and stand your ground in defending her" (I Corinthians 13:7).

Am I believing (and saying) the best in everyone I talk about? Yikes! Are you? Imagine what your friendships would be like if instead of gossiping, you held your tongue. Or if, when you heard gossip sneak in to a conversation, you said, "Stop! I don't need to hear that - it has nothing to do with me." Where's the best place to start combating gossip? You!

THE GREATEST COMMANDS

We were made for relationship. We thirst for intimacy with others - to know and to be known. Isn't it amazing that the greatest commandment Jesus gives us wasn't a to-do list we could ever check off ?

Jesus replied, "You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37-39)

The fact that the two greatest commands God has given us are about LOVE speaks volumes about the significance of relationships! He truly made us for relationship - first for a deep devotion to Him - and secondly for a strong commitment to others. Friendships are an invaluable way God allows us to see even the tiniest glimpse of how He loves us! I hope you'll keep building strong relationships with sturdy pillars and be on the watch for those crazy pitfalls that will endanger healthy friendships if you're not intentional about avoiding them.

Everyone has a picture of friendship in their mind. I'm not sure what yours looks like. In our culture today, where acquiring a "friend" has been reduced to a mouseclick, I fear our picture of friendship could be drawn on an Etch-a-Sketch, erased with the slightest "shake up." I hope that's not true for you.

I hope that you take to heart some of the things I've shared and that you allow the Lord to craft for you a beautiful and lasting work of art. By following a few godly principles, we get to be a part of what He has intended for us all along: deeply committed relationships of unconditional love, which mirror His love for us. This is truly God's masterpiece.

Questions for Reflection/Discussion

(For individual or group use)

The Big Picture

- Think of five of the closest relationships in your life right now. How do you feel like you "mirror" God's love to each of them?
- Think of a time you've felt rejected. What did that feel like? What did you do about it? Is there anything you would've done differently if you could have a "do-over?"
- Read Hebrews 3:12-14. What observations do you make from these verses? How could you make this practical in your relationships?
- Take a look at the Relationship Cycle. Focus on the left side and look up each of the verses, making observations in relation to the cycle:
 - Jer 9:24 / Jer 24:7

- John 3:16 / Mt. 22:37 / John 17:20-23
- 2 Cor 6:11-13
- Rom 15:5, 6
- John 13:34, 35

Relational Snapshot

- Pillar #1: Communication, How would you describe your closest friendships in comparison to the “relational water sports” example?
- Pillar #2: Vulnerability. Why do you think it seems “cool” in our culture today to be “transparent?” Try to describe an example of transparency vs vulnerability.
- Pillar #3: Freedom. How do you know when you feel “freedom” in a friendship? What would make you feel freedom with a friend?
- Pillar #4: Agape Love. Read the definition of agape love: “the commitment of devotion that is directed by the will and can be commanded as a duty.” Based on that definition, how well are you doing at loving your friends?
- Pitfall #1: Manipulation. Describe a way you’ve felt manipulated recently. How about a way that you have manipulated someone recently?
- Pitfall #2: Expectations. Give an example of how you would communicate with a friend who was forcing unrealistic or unspoken expectations on you?
- Pitfall #3: Jealousy. Respond to this statement, “No matter how silently jealousy creeps into the heart, left untreated it infects relationships and leaves behind

broken hearts... Jealousy distorts your perspective, locking all your attention on another person's blessing instead of your own." Where have you seen this play out in your own life?

- Pitfall #4: Gossip. As this is one of the easiest pitfalls to succumb to, here are a few simple guidelines to steer you away from falling in to the dark hole of gossip:
 - What's your motive in sharing it? Does it involve you?
 - Is it true?
 - Is it nice?
 - Is it necessary? Will it help?
 - Are you (can you be) a part of the solution?

Endnotes

1. *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/expert>. Retrieved July 10, 2011.

2. *NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 1472.

3. Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages* (Chicago: Moody, 2010). For more information, see <http://www.5lovelanguages.com/assessments/love>.

4. Dawn Sundstrom, "Jealousy's Silent Effect On Our Lives." *WorldWide Challenge*, July/August 2002.