

GROW: 2. Providential Relationships
Proverbs 13:20; 1 Corinthians 15:33
February 10, 2019
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In my senior year of college, I was selected as one of 4 representatives from the San Diego State University Marching Aztec Band go to EPCOT Center in Orlando, Florida for the Opening Ceremonies. Disney was assembling a 450 piece All American College Marching Band. College band members from all over the United States were flown to Orlando, shuttled to our hotel and then gathered in the biggest room they could find for our first full rehearsal that night. It was crowded, hot and loud. And it was awesome! I was in the trombone section. This band was a trombone player's dream because there we 76 trombones in this band! We sounded amazing!

The next morning at breakfast, in this huge ball room with 449 of our new best friends, this confident and attractive group of young men from the University of Michigan approached our table where the four of us young women from San Diego State were seated and asked if they could join us for breakfast. One of those attractive young men was another trombone player that I had actually noticed the night before at our first rehearsal. Well to make a long story short, after a week together in Florida and then another two years of long distance dating, three kids and four grandsons later, Jerry and I have now been married for almost 35 years. I have no doubt that God put Jerry and me in that band and at that breakfast table for a very specific reason, to bless our lives and grow our faith.

We're in week two of series that we're calling GROW: The Five Things God Uses to Grow Our Faith: Last week we tackled the first one, Practical Biblical Teaching. The Bible teaches us about who God is, the nature of God, the history of God's people and how we are to live in this world as a followers of Christ. It's filled with great applications for all aspects of life; marriage, finances, work, relationships, social justice, and even love. But it's not enough to just read the Bible, we have to apply it to your lives. Our faith grows when we put what we learn into practice. Today we're going to talk about providential relationships and how God puts people in our lives to help grow our faith.

Providential relationships are relationships that occur at an opportune time for a specific reason. These are relationships that God brings into our life that ignite and grow your faith. These are the kind of people that challenge you to see the new possibilities and understand new truths in order for you to grow. You usually see those relationships the clearest in hindsight, you look back and say to yourself, "Thank you, God that person came into my life when they did."

So let me ask, "Who is someone in your life that you feel like God used to grow your faith?" This might be a person who spent a lot of time with you and invested in your life and because of that person you felt like your faith in God grew, it got bigger.

Or, you may have come in this morning not even sure you if you're a person of faith. Maybe you still have a lot of questions about God, or you have issues with the church, or questions about what the Bible says. You know what? A lot of us have those same questions. So you're in good company and it's good that you're here. So here's another question, "Who has stirred up your interest in faith or caused you to give God a chance in your life?" It could be the person that brought you today or a friend that you have been watching that makes you interested in re-examining your faith.

When I think about my relationship with Jerry, I can easily associate it with the word “providential”. I truly believe that God intersected my life with Jerry’s life at key critical junctures in my life so to bless us and grow our faith.

But what I want to make clear is this, I had a part to play in each of these relationships. It was not like God forced His way into my life. I choose to be open to Jerry’s invitation to eat breakfast with me. And then Jerry and I had to both be open for the next two years to what God was doing in our lives. We both had to choose to be open.

Here’s the really cool thing about God. God never intended for us to do life alone. Whenever you hear someone tell their faith story, it always involves other people. They start out by saying it was this friend that believed in them, or it was a youth leader who continued to call. Maybe it was a teacher at school or a supervisor or boss that shared about some difficult times they went through and how God was there for them. God uses people to help us through the next steps in our faith.

Throughout the Bible, we can see many situations where Jesus invited people into a relationship with him. For example, when Jesus invited his disciples, Peter and his brother, Andrew to follow him. He said, “Come with me. I’ll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I’ll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass.” They didn’t ask questions, but simply dropped their nets and followed. They accepted Jesus’ invitation. Or when Jesus saw the despised tax collector, Zacchaeus who had climbed up in a tree so he could get a glimpse of Jesus. Do you remember what Jesus said him? “Come down, Zacchaeus! I’m coming to your house for dinner!” Jesus showed us how to live our lives in community with others so to help and encourage one another.

We all have people in our lives who want to invest in us and help us grow in our faith but maximizing the relationships in our lives for the purpose of growing our faith is only half the picture. God also wants us to have a positive impact on others that will benefit their lives as well. Sometimes we are the wise one that needs to extend that invitation to a relationship. Proverbs 27:17 sums it up well. It says, “As Iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” Anybody here like to cook? Every good chef knows a dull knife can be more dangerous than a sharp one. That’s because when a blade is dull, it’s harder to control. That’s why chefs will spend hundreds of dollars on a really good knife but even a good knife becomes dull with use. And on its own, it will never become sharp again. A knife cannot sharpen itself nor can something weaker than iron sharpen iron. We all have those friends who inspire us to be better than we are, friends who sharpen us in areas where they are strong. For example, a wise friend can make you wiser. A loving friend can expand your capacity to love. Someone who knows their Bible can enhance your understanding of Scripture. When we think of sharpening a blade, or sharpening ourselves, it’s always done for a purpose. A chef doesn’t sharpen their knife so it looks better lying on the kitchen counter. Sharpening is done to make it more effective and efficient. And as Christians, we are to allow ourselves be sharpened, as well as to sharpen others, in order to grow as disciples, to make disciples and to grow God’s kingdom here on earth. Through our relationships we can continued to improve each other, help each other, speak the truth in love to each other so to learn new things and grow in our faith.

The Broadway musical, *Wicked*, the prequel to the story of *The Wizard of Oz*, tells the story of two such friends, Elphaba, the greened-faced Wicked Witch of the West, and her improbable friend, the spoiled rich girl and local princess, Galinda, the Good Witch. In spite of their opposing personalities and viewpoints, their rivalry over the same love-interest, their reactions to the Wizard’s corrupt government, and Elphaba’s very public fall from grace and through living

through hard times together... a beautiful friendship emerges. Like the song goes, "because I knew you, I have been changed for good." Are there people in your life who can say that about you and you them? Are you open to these kinds of relationships? Are you open to relationships that can have a huge impact in your lives in which God can blow up and impact your faith in amazing ways. That is the main point of my message today. God uses relationships to grow our faith.

So, I have talked about the good things about relationships. Let me tell you about the not so cool part of relationships, the flip-side- because the opposite is also true. This principle also works both ways. I could have started today by asking you this question, "Has there been anyone in your life that cause you to doubt your faith in God?" Are there relationships in your past or presently that have taken the wind out of your sails and as a result you have less faith and have found yourself blown further away from God? This could be a relationship with someone who did enough damage that you could not see yourself ever trusting God again. Or one of your greatest regrets in life might be traced back to a conversation or person or even a group of people that hurt your faith and trust in God.

1 Corinthians 15:33 gives us a warning, "Do not be misled: Bad company corrupts good character." Relationships can bring us up. Relationships can also drag us down. I can remember my parents always telling me your friends determine the direction and quality of your life. I can now see that to be true. I can see through my experience that the people I spent time with in high school, the people I hung out with college, and the people with whom I interact still today, influence the person I am today. Every person you come in contact with in some way can erode your faith in God or build it up. There are no neutral relationships. Every day, you have a choice to make when it come to your relationships. Proverbs 13:20 it says, "Become wise by walking with the wise; hang out with fools and watch your life fall to pieces." I don't think you have to be a Christian to agree with this verse. If you walk with wise people you become wiser, but if you hang out with foolish people, your life will eventually fall apart. The people you spend time with is the person you become.

So if it's true that God uses people to help us grow our faith, I want to invite you to consider this.... might God be calling you to help someone else grow in their faith? I know this may sound scary and awkward and for some of you this may be a complete paradigm shift. "You mean to tell me that I can actually help someone with their faith?" Look around and ask God to examine your life and see if there someone in your life that may be in need of your help. Reading tutors at Oakwood Elementary, Faith Group leaders, Confirmation mentors, Prayer Partners, Church School teachers, and Scout Leaders, you have a unique opportunity to develop a relationship that can enhance lives and possibly even grow faith.

Do you want to know something? It's not a secret. That's the main reason Messiah Church hosts events like the Health Kit Packing Party on Martin Luther King Day, and the Living Nativity, and Bless the Business, and even coffee hour after worship each week... to create a space for relationships to take seed and grow. That's why we're doing The Music Man in March. It's not a fundraiser, we are not making any money on this. This is a Friend Raiser, a way to invite friends and neighbors to start new relationships and grow existing ones. We were not created to do life alone. God created us to live in relationship God and with one another. So let me wrap things up. Here's what I hope you'll take away from today's message:

1. Be intentional about who you spend time with. Your friends determine the direction and quality of your life. You friends will determine the direction and quality of your life.

2. Move into situations where relationships can be built and grow. Get out there and take risks. Do something constructive where God can do something relationally. Sign up to be a Prayer Partner, or a Sunday School Teacher or a Scout Leader.

3. Be in prayer about who God is calling you to invite into a relationship. Make yourself more available. Be willing to have an awkward conversation that's been on your heart so to help someone else grow in their faith.

For better or worse, we are known by the company we keep, and the people with whom we choose to surround ourselves invariably have a strong influence on our beliefs and actions. God wants our faith to be BIG but must choose to be open to these kind of relations because God uses relationships to grow our faith.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of February 10, 2019

Weekly Prayer: Gracious God, I give You thanks for all the ways that You bless my life; for the love of family and friends, for the joy of knowing You and hearing Your word. Send Your Spirit on me so that my eyes will be open that I might see those in my life with whom You want me to connect. Guide my thoughts and actions. Bring me closer to You so that I might do Your will. Amen.

Monday, February 11

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:33

Do not be misled. Bad company corrupts good character.

Observation: "You are known by the company you keep." How many times have we heard that old saying? As a teenager that might have sounded silly, but it only takes a moment to realize how true it is. Maybe that realization comes after getting arrested for being at a party with underage drinking, even though we didn't have a drink. Maybe it comes when we find ourselves the subject of the gossip among the friends we usually gossip with. Or maybe the truth of that statement hits us hard when we are passed over for a promotion because our coworkers' negative attitude influenced us to stop caring and trying at work. Community is a choice. We choose to invest in friendships that are beneficial and help us to be better followers of Jesus, or we can choose to invest in the friendships that would take us farther away from Jesus.

Application: The Lord has given us a great opportunity in the local church to create deep, meaningful, helpful friendships. We all need deep friendships where we share life struggles, we encourage, we speak the truth in love, and we share our disappointments and victories. What kind of person do you want to be? Are you surrounding yourself with the friendships that could help you become that person? One of the best investments you can make is in friendships that encourage you to be more like Jesus. Are there any friendships that you need to invest more in? Are there any friendships that you need to invest less in? What is one step you can take today to be more like Jesus in your friendships?

Prayer: God, thank You for the people You have brought into my life to ignite and grow my faith. Amen.

Tuesday, February 12

Scripture: Proverbs 13:20 (The Message)

Become wise by walking with the wise; hang out with fools and watch your life fall to pieces.

Observation: Your friends and the people you surround yourself with are important. The people you choose to spend time with and get advice from matter a lot to your future. I once heard someone say to never take advice from anyone who isn't smarter than you in an area. What they meant was, if you need money advice, you need to find someone who manages their money better than you do. If you need relationship advice, find someone who has successful relationships in their life. Who you walk with, associate with, and take advice from makes a big difference in your life. If you struggle with the temptation to sin in a particular area, you will want to avoid spending too much time with friends who struggle in the same area.

Application: Your future is important enough to say no to a bad relationship. Think about who the wise people are in your life. Who are those people who seem to have a special peace and grace about them? Who are those who seem to have mastered the art of living God's way? Seek out and get advice from wise people. Establish close relationships with those who challenge you to be better and grow closer to God.

Prayer: Loving God, reveal to me those relationships in my life that are pulling me down the wrong path. Give me the strength and trust to say "no" to those relationships. Then give me the wisdom and courage to say "yes" to the good, Christ-centered relationships in my life. Amen.

Wednesday, February 13

Scripture: Proverbs 27:17

As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.

Observation: Every cook knows that a dull knife can be more dangerous than a sharp one. Although it seems contradictory, a dull-edged blade can actually do more damage to the cook than to the food! That's because when a blade is dull, it's harder to use. Not only does it take more force to actually cut something, but also it's harder to control. That's why a dull blade can slice a finger quicker than a tomato, and why chefs spend hundreds on a great knife. Every knife becomes dull with use. The sharp edge rounds out, and little chips develop. Cutting will render a blade ineffective, and on its own, it will never become sharp again. That's the first truth about sharpening iron: a knife cannot sharpen itself. Nor can something weaker than iron sharpen iron. We've all had the experience of friends who inspire us to be better than we are, and friends who don't. A godly Christian friend can sharpen you in areas they are strong. For example, a wise friend can make you wiser. A loving friend can expand your capacity to love. A biblically knowledgeable friend can enhance your understanding of Scripture.

Application: When we think of sharpening a blade, or sharpening ourselves, it's always done for a purpose. A chef doesn't sharpen his or her knife so it looks better lying on the kitchen counter. Sharpening is done to make it more effective and efficient. If we sharpen a knife for years and never put it into use, it will eventually be sharpened down to nothing, with nothing to show for all that honing. As Christians, we are to be sharpened, and to sharpen others, in order to grow God's kingdom here on earth. Whether we are talking about a knife or ourselves, sharpening isn't done for a passive activity. A blade is sharpened to accomplish a purpose.

Prayer: Dear Lord, You are the source of all strength and goodness. Thank You for helping me to grow in faith and also for putting friends in my life who can help sharpen me. Show me who in my life I can walk alongside so as to be an encouragement to them. Then help me to use that sharpening to advance Your Kingdom here on earth. Amen.

Thursday, February 14

Scripture: Hebrews 10: 24-25

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Observation: The book of Hebrews is saturated with lessons, illustrations, and reasons for faith. The writer understood what we can easily forget—faith flourishes in community. We don't go off by ourselves to grow spiritually. The condition of our faith is a result of the quality of our relationship with God and with other believers. This passage includes two specific ways in which faith flourishes, and they both rely heavily on others. The writer pointed to stir[ring] up one another and encouraging one another as key growth habits for followers of Jesus. And he made it clear that this process starts, not by expecting others to do for us, but by considering how we may cause the faith of others to flourish. The phrase “stir up one another” has an edge to it in the original. It can be translated as “provoke one another.” The idea is to lovingly call out and challenge one another to love and do good. Mutual accountability is about sharing with each other how we're doing, but it's also pushing each other to do better. Sometimes this happens spontaneously, but usually, if we want to effectively stir one another up, or challenge a brother or sister to step up their Christian walk, we ought to prayerfully consider how best to do it. Encouraging one another is connected to the importance of living in community with other believers. We can't encourage one another unless we are regularly together. When we are invested in mutual encouragement and standing with one another, we are also learning to function well as Christ's body.

Application: *Which of these faith boosters is currently in need of attention in your personal faith development: practical biblical teaching or providential relationships? What can you do this week to change that? When will you do it?*

Prayer: Lord, You not only feed my faith directly by Your faithfulness, but You surround me with undeniable opportunities to see my faith and the faith of others flourish. Develop in me a growing awareness of what others need by way of encouragement to make their faith grow. Amen.

Friday, February 15

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:11

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Observation: In the early days of the fledgling church in Jerusalem, there was a man who was such an encouragement to the body of Christ that they did not call him by the name given by his parents. They simply called him “son of encouragement.” We know that name as Barnabas. The name “Barnabas” means son of encouragement. We see in this man many instances of encouragement. In Acts 4 he sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money to the apostles so that they could take care of the needy Christians in Jerusalem. In Acts 9 we see Barnabas again when Paul becomes a Christian. Paul comes to Christ and tries to join the

church in Jerusalem. The church refused Paul; because he had been a persecutor of Christians, they did not believe he was a disciple. Who was the person who came to the side of this persecutor of Christians? Barnabas did. Barnabas brought Paul to the apostles and told them about how Paul had been boldly preaching the name of Jesus. Then in Acts 15, after Mark had left Paul and Barnabas during their first preaching journey, who wants to have Mark come with them on the second journey? Barnabas does.

Application: We all need this kind of encouragement in our lives. This is exactly what God has called for us to have toward one another. What are you doing to be an encourager to others? Who is a Barnabas to you in your life? Reach out today and offer a word of encouragement to someone who needs it or a thank you to a Barnabas in your life.

Prayer: God of Wisdom, thank You for the Barnabases who have been and are currently are speaking into my life. Help me to be mindful of people I may know who are in need of an encourager in their lives so to grow their faith. Put me to use! I am Yours. Amen.

Saturday, February 16

Scripture: Proverbs 17:17

Friends love through all kinds of weather, and families stick together in all kinds of trouble.

Observation: A true friend never fails, no matter what. A true friend, like family, is always ready to help in time of need or trouble. King Solomon described excellent friends in very few words. Ask yourself if you are such a friend, and ask if you have such friends. We are better together. Good friends share in successes, help when we fall, provide encouragement and synergy, and help oppose enemies. Such friends are not found easily; they are a blessing from God.

Application: A true friend loves when things are tough and when life isn't easy. Challenge yourself today to be there for the people around you and show them the love of Jesus. Challenge yourself to push past what seems comfortable and to really be present for your friends.

Prayer: God of Peace, thank You for my friends. I am blessed by those who choose to walk with me through times of plenty as well as in times of great need. I pray that I can be the same kind of friend to those who need me. Help me to maximize all of the relationships in my life for the purpose of growing in my faith and growing closer to You. Amen.