

**RELATIONSHIPS****DEUTERONOMY 6:5; JOHN 13:34-35; MATTHEW 4:19**

Intentional relationships are much more important than most of us realize. American prisoners of war in the Vietnam War learned that lesson. They realized that nothing destroys you quicker than isolation. These men communicated – and sustained each other by doing so – by tapping on the walls of their cells in the Hanoi Hilton – the name they gave their infamous prison. One Air Force pilot said that the prison sounded like a den of runaway woodpeckers! Their North Vietnamese captors never mastered the code they developed. The code flowed so fluently that the men told each other jokes – kicks on the wall meant a laugh. Every Sunday, at a coded signal, the men stood and recited the Lord’s Prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance. Relationships.

This morning I begin a new message series entitled “ROPES: Discipleship Described.” A brief recap will be helpful. About a year and a half ago now, our church launched a new vision focused on intentional discipleship and disciple-making. We believe it’s key to becoming the church God wants us to be. We invited coaches from the Navigators ministry to guide us through the process. We brought together a group of people within the church to help lead this effort. Its task is to design the process by which our church can develop a strong discipleship culture. This is a committed and faithful group of God’s people that I’m proud and pleased to serve alongside. You should know who they are, pray for them, and thank them for their ministry! If they’re here, I’ll ask them to stand when I call out their name. Sean Billingslea serves as our current Team Leader. In addition to Sean, members of the team include my wife, Cheryl, Mike Etherington, Kathy Jasinski, Carol Kirn, Jeff Lashley, Sharon Merz, Lola Powell, and Michelle Prindle. And then from our staff, Aaron, Aimee, Beth and myself make up the rest of the team. Let’s show our appreciation for their ministry!

Believe me, we’ve been busy, although most of what we’ve done has been kind of under the radar. More people in our church are now participating in new, intentional discipleship and disciple-making relationships than a year ago. As a team, we’ve been primarily studying, praying, preparing, and planning. We did offer a Devotional Life Seminar to the whole congregation last year and another one is being offered two weeks from today. We did promote and analyze the REVEAL congregational survey which gave us a wealth of information about our church’s current spiritual vitality. Another task was to develop our church’s picture of a disciple. What emerged is what I want to share with you over the next five Sundays. We call it ROPES for short because that helps us remember the five characteristics of a disciple of Jesus. R stands for Relationships, O for Obedience, P for Prayer, E for Evangelism, and S for Scripture.

ROPES. Right now, I’m going to ask our ushers to pass out some business size cards to anyone and everyone as a reminder. Stick it in your Bible. Put it on your refrigerator. It says “Living by the Ropes” on one side and on the other side is a brief description of each of those five aspects of discipleship. This is not Rick Breusch’s picture of a disciple; it’s the Karl Road Baptist Church picture of a disciple. But I can tell you that it has my personal, 110%, enthusiastic support! I hope God will use it as a kind of roadmap for many years to help transform our church and to make disciples for Jesus.

Today, I want us to think about the R in ROPES which stands for Relationships. What do relationships have to do with being a follower of Jesus? Why are relationships an integral and all important part of the KRBC picture of discipleship? Well, let me break this down into three statements that are supported by three key Scriptures. First of all...

### **A DISCIPLE TREASURES A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.**

To be a follower of Jesus – a disciple – you must desire and possess a personal relationship with God. That might seem obvious, but sometimes the obvious needs to be stated. A key Scripture verse for this truth is Deuteronomy 6:5 which says, “And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.” (NLT) That verse helps us understand what kind of relationship with God we should all pursue as Jesus’ followers. Now, let’s unpack that verse just a bit. The word used to describe the relationship you and I should have with God is “love.” It doesn’t say “And you must honor... respect... be afraid of... obey... believe in... or trust in the Lord your God” although, to be fair, those can certainly be demonstrations of loving God. The primary word is love. That is, above all, a relational word. Love demands another Person and God is a Person you can love. He is more than Creator. He is more than Supreme Being. He is more than the Almighty. He is Someone you can know and love.

But this verse gets profound when it describes how you should love God. You should love the Lord with all your heart, it says. The Hebrew word “lebab” encompasses our emotions like joy, excitement, grief, anger, even envy. It can include your thoughts and will so it includes your mind, your understanding, and the place from where you make decisions. You’re called here to love God with all your emotions, thoughts, and will. You should love the Lord with all your soul, it says. The Hebrew word “nephesh” refers to your inner drives, cravings, and appetites. You’re encouraged here to develop a personal yearning for God – an insatiable appetite for God and the things of God. You should love the Lord with all your strength, it says. The Hebrew word “me’od” refers to something done in an excessive, abundant way. You’re commanded here to love God with great force, deep passion, strong feelings, and holy intensity.

How are you supposed to love God? With all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. I love how the Message translation renders this verse, “Love GOD, your God, with your whole heart: love him with all that’s in you, love him with all you’ve got.” (MSG) Nothing mild, mediocre, or half-hearted about this kind of love for God! Don’t just love God! Love God with all that’s in you and with all you’ve got! Jesus said this was the single most important commandment of all. He said, “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.” (Mat 22:37-38 NLT) The first and most important relationship for a disciple of Jesus is the one we have with God Himself.

Diandra Leslie-Pelecky, a physics professor at the University of Texas, wrote a book about the physics of NASCAR racing. For her research she was given the opportunity to drive a race car at the Texas Motor Speedway. With an instructor in the passenger seat,

she drove the car at speeds up to 150 m.p.h. It was while accelerating to get up to that speed that she learned an interesting lesson about race cars. A race car engine is optimized for speed, so when you're puttering along at only 100 mph, the car chugs roughly and uncomfortably. The solution is to go faster. Don't slow down. Go faster! The lesson? Things run best when used as they were designed. You were designed to live fully for God. If you live halfway for God, you will feel like you're driving a racecar with a chugging engine. Your soul just won't feel right. The answer is to commit yourself and everything about you fully to the Lord.

One way you can grow that love relationship with the Lord is by developing a regular, personal time with the Lord. You read God's Word and apply it to your life. You talk to God and you learn how to listen to the Lord, too. You haven't made that a part of your life with the Lord yet? Then, I encourage you to sign up for the Devotional Life Seminar on Sunday, January 24 from 4-6 pm. Use your Connect Card. What will you do this year to follow Jesus more intentionally? Another place where that ought to find expression is on Sunday mornings between 10:15 and Noon. Who needs emotionless, bland, passive worship! I appreciate Karen, the praise team, and all those who encourage and help us to express our love for God wholeheartedly. Your worship of God and mine should be with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. You're not a spectator. Get into it! Give yourself to it! We're getting better, but we aren't there yet! The Bible says, "Let all that I am praise the LORD; with my whole heart, I will praise his holy name. Let all that I am praise the LORD; may I never forget the good things he does for me." (Ps 103:1-2 NLT) Do you treasure a relationship with God? Do you love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength? Relationships. What do relationships have to do with being a follower of Jesus? Everything! Secondly,...

### **A DISCIPLE INVESTS IN THE SPIRITUAL LIVES OF OTHERS IN ORDER TO MAKE MORE DISCIPLES.**

Now, the emphasis here is on relationships with other human beings who are also followers of Jesus. A key Scripture passage for this truth is something Jesus said on the night He was betrayed – the night before He died on the cross. Jesus said, "So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." (John 13:34-35 NLT) Let's unpack that passage. Notice, first of all, that this is a command. Loving other people – and how can you do that if you don't enter into a relationship with them? – is not a suggestion, not a guideline, and not an option if you're a follower of Jesus. If you want to follow Jesus, you gotta do this!

I'm intrigued by a second observation. Jesus said this was a new command. Why? Apparently, He hadn't yet made this a requirement for being His follower until that moment. Perhaps he was waiting for that very meaningful evening – the night of the Last Supper – to give this aspect of discipleship the kind of emphasis and weight that it demanded. You'll remember that those first twelve disciples loved Jesus a whole lot, but they didn't necessarily love each other. Not at first. They jockeyed for position and rank. They argued over who was going to be the greatest. All that had to change if

other people were going to become followers of Jesus. Third, notice that we are called to love other followers of Jesus with God's kind of love. The verb is "agapao" in the original Greek language. We've all heard about "agape" love – God's sacrificial, incredible, inexhaustible, "put you first" kind of love. When the Holy Spirit is living in us, we become capable of extending that kind of love to others.

And then Jesus adds a fourth element there that's truly remarkable. Those who don't follow Jesus will be given the right to judge our authenticity as His followers by the presence of God's love in our lives – by how we treat each other in the family of God. What proves you are Jesus' disciple? Getting baptized? Preparing or listening to messages? Knowing every hymn or worship song ever written? An ability to pray? Being a great servant in the church? Tithing? Meeting the needs of the poor? "Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." (John 13:35 NLT) I hope I'm understanding Jesus correctly here. I think He's saying there's a choice to be made here. You can intentionally invest in loving relationships with other followers of Jesus or not. If you don't pursue and cultivate those relationships, it will be harder for non-Christians to see Jesus in your life and become His disciples. But if you do pursue and cultivate loving relationships, you somehow release the beauty of Jesus' love into your life and people say, "That person knows Jesus." Elsewhere, God's Word puts it like this, "If we love our brothers and sisters who are believers, it proves that we have passed from death to life." (1 John 3:14 NLT) That's strong! I'm not sure that when we're evaluating someone's walk with the Lord, we ever put that kind of value on loving others or on the quality of his or her relationships. But God does.

Did you now the phrase "one another" or "each other" is found 59 times in the New Testament? Are you ready? Here's just 36 of them coming right at you right now! "Be devoted to **one another** in love. Honor **one another** above yourselves." (Rom 12:10) "Live in harmony with **one another**." (Rom 12:16) "Love **one another**." (Rom 13:8) "Stop passing judgment on **one another**." (Rom 14:13) "Have the same attitude of mind toward **each other** that Christ Jesus had." (Rom 15:5) "Accept **one another**." (Rom 15:7) "Instruct **one another**." (Rom 15:14) "Agree with **one another**." (1 Cor 1:10) "Have equal concern for **each other**." (1 Cor 12:25) "Encourage **one another**." (2 Cor 13:11) "Serve **one another** humbly in love." (Gal 5:13) "Carry **each other's** burdens" (Gal 6:2) "Be patient, bearing with **one another** in love." (Eph 4:2) "Be kind and compassionate to **one another**, forgiving each other." (Eph 4:32) "Speaking to **one another** with psalms, hymns, and songs." (Eph 5:18) "Submit to **one another**." (Eph 5:21) "In your relationships with **one another**, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus." (Ph 2:5) "Do not lie to **each other**." (Col 3:9)

"Bear with each other and forgive **one another**." (Col 3:13) "Teach and admonish **one another**." (Col 3:16) "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for **each other**." (1 Th 3:12) "Therefore encourage **one another** with these words." (1 Th 4:18) "But encourage **one another** daily." (Heb 3:13) "Let us consider how we may spur **one another** on toward love and good deeds." (Heb 10:24) "Keep on loving **one another** as brothers and sisters." (Heb 13:1) "Do not slander **one another**." (Jam 4:11) "Don't grumble against **one another**." (Jam 5:9) "Confess your sins to **each other** and pray

for **each other** so that you may be healed.” (Jam 5:16) “Love **one another** deeply, from the heart.” (1 Pt 1:22) “Be like-minded, be sympathetic, love **one another**.” (1 Pt 3:8) “Offer hospitality to **one another** without grumbling.” (1 Peter 4:9) “Clothe yourselves with humility toward **one another**.” (1 Pt 5:5) “We should love **one another**.” (1 Jo 3:11) “Love **one another** as he commanded us.” (1 Jo 3:23) “Let us love **one another**.” (1 Jo 4:7) “We also ought to love **one another**.” (1 Jo 4:11) “Love **one another**.” (1 Jo 4:12) “I ask that we love **one another**.” (2 Jo 5)

Do you think following Jesus is about relationships? The fact is that you and I grow spiritually by rubbing shoulders with other people who want to grow spiritually. You can grow spiritually only so far and so long all by yourself. If you want to grow spiritually, you will reject the idea that it’s an isolated, solitary, and exclusive kind of experience. “Just me and Jesus!” No, instead, you will intentionally pursue spiritual relationships that help you grow. The simple fact is that you need other disciples of Jesus to develop as a disciple of Jesus yourself. Now, I’d guess most of us will acknowledge the truth of what I’ve just said. You might even nod your head and say, “Good thought there, Pastor!” But here’s the reality. This is a growth area for our church. Remember, I mentioned that REVEAL congregational survey we did last year? It revealed that more of us need to cultivate intentional, deep spiritual friendships with other followers of Jesus inside or outside the church. These are the kind of relationships where we talk about the Lord and about Scripture passages together, where we pray for one another, and where we help each other become whoever Jesus wants us to be.

I call them “friendships with an agenda.” You might think a real friendship doesn’t have an agenda. I beg to differ. The best kind of friendship is where I help you get closer to Jesus and you help me get closer to Jesus. That’s the agenda! I’ve been growing in that area of my walk with the Lord myself this past year. I have intentionally developed spiritual relationships with several other men where the intent is to help them, and have those men help me, follow Jesus better. Some of them have been one-to-one relationships. Others have been in triads. I know it’s helped me become a better disciple personally and I hope it’s had the same result for those men. So, are you interested in a “friendship with an agenda”? Stay tuned. Come late February and early March there’s going to be an opportunity for you to be part of a group of two or three other followers of Jesus who want to follow Jesus better. We’re not going to make a big promotion out of it, but let me know if you’re interested. Again, what are you going to do this year to follow Jesus more intentionally? Relationships. What do relationships have to do with being a follower of Jesus? Everything! Thirdly ...

### **A DISCIPLE ENGAGES IN FRIENDSHIP WITH BELIEVERS AND UNBELIEVERS.**

I want to focus on the fact that we’re also called to develop relationships intentionally with those who aren’t followers of Jesus. The key verse is what Jesus said to some of the men who He first called to be His disciples. “Jesus called out to them, ‘Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!’” (Matt 4:19 NLT) Jesus makes an analogy here between fishing and trying to reach people who aren’t His followers yet with the message of His love and grace. So let me close by trying to answer this

question: how is reaching out to non-Christians like fishing? Now, I've only dabbled in fishing. I do have a copy of *Fishing for Dummies* somewhere in the house. I learned a lot about stuff I didn't know by reading that book, but it didn't help me much in becoming a great fisherman. But I think I understand enough to know what Jesus was trying to get at by comparing fishing to helping people become His disciples.

First of all, both require patience and perseverance. The little fishing I've done called forth reservoirs of patience that I did not have at the time! For most people, it takes a while for them to figure out they need Jesus. For some it can be a lengthy process before they finally surrender their lives to Him as Lord and Savior. Be patient and persevere. Both fishing and reaching out to lost people require wisdom. The more you fish, the more you learn the do's and don'ts of fishing – the best time is this time of day, this is the better location, this is the better bait. Wisdom is only gained through actual experience. It's the same with people. You have to observe, learn, and be sensitive. Both require the right "bait." Have you ever checked out all the different kinds of bait that are available to fishermen? It boggles the mind! By the same token, God has many way to reach people. Unless it's unethical, don't write off any method. God is most apt to match the way you're already wired up to reach people He's already prepared for you to reach.

Both fishing and reaching lost people require willingness not credentials. I've been told fish don't care if you have a college degree. They don't even care if you're considered a master fishermen. None of the twelve men Jesus selected were rabbis or priests. Several were, in fact, fishermen by occupation. One was a tax collector while another was a political operative. None of them came from rich or influential families. All God ever needs is ordinary followers of Jesus who are willing to be used by and for Him. God can do anything through people who are extraordinarily surrendered to Him. Finally, both require action. Have you heard the expression, "Are you going to fish or cut bait?" There's a big difference between planning to fish, preparing to fish, and actually putting your hook in the water and fishing. Building a friendship with a lost person may well demand an intentional effort on your part. It might require you to swallow your reservations, get out of your comfort zone, and take a risk. It will most definitely call you and me to get intentional and act.

There's a story of a man who had no interest in spiritual matters who related casually to the Christian who lived next door to him. They talked over the back fence, borrowed lawn mowers, stuff like that. Then the non-Christian's wife was stricken with cancer, and she died three months later. Here's part of a letter he wrote afterward:

"I was in total despair. I went through the funeral preparations and the service like I was in a trance. After the service I went to the path along the river and walked all night. But I didn't walk alone. My neighbor—afraid for me, I guess—stayed with me all night. He didn't speak; he didn't even walk beside me. He just followed me. When the sun finally came up over the river, he came over and said, 'Let's go get some breakfast.' I go to church now. My neighbor's church. A religion that can produce the kind of caring and love my neighbor showed me is something I want to find out more about. I want to love and be loved like that for the rest of my life."

Relationships. I invite you into an intentional, growing, committed relationship with God, which will then spread into relationships with other followers of Jesus, and with those who need to become His followers. What do relationships have to do with being a follower of Jesus? Everything!