

“Taking Care of Our Most Important Relationships”
“21st Century Challenges Facing Family and Other Relationships”

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Key Text: Ephesians 5:8-21

I. Introduction: Goals and Their Relational Nature

It is hard to believe it is 2019! With a new year comes new opportunities. It's like Paul says, “The old is gone, the new has come.” What new will happen for you in 2019? Have you set some goals for yourself, your family, your business, your class for the new year? As your church family we work on goals each year. Ours include how we go about making disciples of Jesus Christ. So, we set goals around how many people we'd like to see make professions of faith in Jesus and in how we'd like to see new and more people in worship. We hope to add 75 new members and move our average worship attendance back to over 400. With many Methodist churches declining in worship attendance this will be a challenge. Knowing we had around 800 plus for Christmas services, I think it's very possible.

We have goals for disciples to grow in faith by being in a small group—90%. That means 9 out of 10 of you finding a small group or Sunday School to be in so you can learn more about God, faith, the Bible. John Wesley would call this working out your salvation through personal works of piety.

We have goals for disciples to grow in service and in giving through missional activities and through the practice of good stewardship where we are living to give. Remember, as a Methodist church, we are a connectional church, so we stand with 31,867 Methodist churches in the USA and over 12,000 and growing in Africa, Asia, and Cuba. Our goal is to give 20% of our giving to local, national, and international missions and apportionments are part of this so the Lord's work will continue to expand in our day.

Please take your Vital Congregation Goals home and review it, pray over these goals and see what you can do to help make your church fruitful and vital for 2019. There's lots of ways you can make a difference. Maybe you have a creative way to help reach these goals.

II. Life is All About Our Relationships

And that's important for the times in which we live. Because these goals are not about numbers on a piece of paper or for building a resume. These numbers reflect the lives of people. Our lives. And they emphasize our connectedness to God, to each other, to those far from God, and not so far from God. Life is about relationships. And this is how we are going to start our new year, talking about how we can take care of and attend to the most important relationships in our lives. That will look different for each person, depending on where you are in life and who you may be responsible for. It may be how you are relating to your spouse or significant other, your children, teen or grown kids. It may be how you relate to your best friend, fellow students, or in how you provide care to aging parents. It could be you have custody of grandchildren. This is what is true. Relationships are what life is about. Most relationships face many challenges in our day in our culture.

III. The Essential Relationship

I want to be clear, our relationship with God is to be our priority. Being in the best relationship with God possible will be what influences all of our other relationships.

When I'm centered, spending time with God each day, reading my Bible, praying, journaling—just a couple short paragraphs twice a week for me, I am much better in all my relationships. Life is stress full. Full of stress life is. If we are to live as children of light and be the best we can be in our relationships it will have to start with God. Yes, there are lots of challenges we face in our relationships.

IV. Challenges To Our Most Important Relationships

- 1. Social Media** Social media and its influence on our time, our self-worth, the distractions it causes is number one. Can social media be a good thing? Sure. Consider our Live Streaming of our middle service. If you are traveling, or home sick, or have a sporting event then you can tune in to your local church and still feel connected in worship. The danger is that one becomes so accustomed and comfortable live streaming that you isolate and lose the care, support and “accountability” that comes through community.

Scriptures remind us that we are not to forsake the gathering of ourselves together. We have to watch the ease of pseudo-community. It feels like we are in community on Facebook. We’re not!

- 2. The Political Climate** I also think our political climate hinders the development of relationships. Families fight over left and right, progressive and traditional values and viewpoints today. And just as it polarizes the country, it can polarize families. It’s hard to take care of our important relationships if politics becomes the center of our conversations. I’m sure more than one family decided not to talk politics around the Christmas meal and some who did likely walked away with some anger and hurt feelings. How can we learn to disagree without being disagreeable people?
- 3. Not Being Present** Third, most of the time we are so preoccupied with other things we think we need to attend to or be up on, we miss out on being present when we are present with others. I was at a family meal and watched as some family members spent more time on their phones than in conversation with family. We miss out on sharing stories, catching up with each other and we miss out on deeper challenges and feelings of each other. Not being present happens to couples. I heard a story recently from a friend who talked about he and his wife both being in bed, she on her iPad, he on his lap top and both realizing how they’d become emotionally disconnected. It’s easy to happen. I’m excited to hear Pastor Lauren address this “being present when you are present” in a few weeks.
- 4. Other Challenges Relationships Face** A few other challenges look like:
 - Spending more time apart in your relationship than together. The more you are together, the more likely you have time to share and communicate. Playing together is important. Does anyone still have a game night in your family? How about a game night sometime here at church?
 - From a couple’s perspective there are problems in:
 - Communication; Sexual Relations, Finances, Raising Children, Who is Going to do the Chores, Not Knowing How to Deal with Conflict, Not Willing to Forgive, and Losing Trust.
 - For Singles:
 - There is a growing trend of 30 and 40-year olds that are single. Finding the right partner. Being the right partner. How to enjoy single life, not feel alone, how to best cultivate healthy relationships. I think our young adult single ladies are about to have a study start up on dating.

V. The Challenges in Preaching This Series

- 1. We Can Only Scratch the Surface** Truth is, we can only scratch the surface here and we recognize there is no way to presume we know every challenge of each person. Over 9 weeks we do hope to hit on as many areas as possible to help each one grow in your important relationships and how we can keep our most important relationships intact and thriving through difficult days and especially when crisis hit.
- 2. Being Wise in How We Live** Paul encourages the Ephesians and us today in this way, “Be very careful how you live, not as unwise but as wise.” James tells us in James 1:5, “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives to all generously without finding fault, and God will give you wisdom.”
- 3. It Can Be Helpful and Hurtful** The thing is, this series can be really helpful. It can also be really painful and hard. We are to do our best to understand what the will of the Lord is. Bringing God’s Word to bear on our relationships exposes our relationships to the light. Living in the light of God’s goodness, righteousness and truth helps reveal to us where we are coming up short or failing in our relationships. Getting into God’s Word

and having good conversations about our relationships will move us closer to what it says in verse 10, “find out what pleases God”.

4. It May Expose Dark Places Focusing on improving our relationships might indeed expose some dark places. No one said relationships, at any level, are easy. But, if we expose our dark spots, our emotional challenges, our relationship frailties to the light of God’s Word, grace, and truth, things will become visible and we can begin to see more clearly how to work on, maybe even resolve, some relationship challenges and therefore have more meaningful, purposeful, healthier lives all the way around. Let’s make the most of this opportunity, because the days are evil, and we are never guaranteed tomorrow. As I was writing this message, I had two calls from families who lost loved ones. One a 44-year old brother who died from a heart attack, another a young man who also died suddenly by accidental gun shot. Life can change in an instant. How we live now matters.

VI. Moving From Being Filled With Wine to the Spirit

When Paul talks about “not getting drunk on wine, but be filled with the Spirit,”(vs 18) I think it’s because he wants us to think clearly. Getting drunk on wine is associated with the old way of life and its selfish desires. Oh, did I share that the worst type of relationship you can be in is where one person is self-centered? I share with every couple I marry that selfish, self-centered people do not make for good marriage partners. That’s true in all our relationships.

Paul says, “don’t be foolish, understand God’s will”. (vs 17) I have to think that is what most of you desire if you are here for worship today.

This is not about self-help, it’s about helping us be better and to attend to our important relationships the very best we can. And to be like and live like Jesus.

And let’s not be concerned about how much of the Holy Spirit we have, but how much the Holy Spirit has of us.

VII. What It Means to Submit and How it Can be Helpful

And that first word in verse 21—“Submit”—Oh, don’t go there, Pastor! Let’s remember, submitting is not about being a doormat or just rolling over and giving in. Submitting to God first means we will be more willing to obey God’s commands and to live in the light versus doing our own thing.

Submitting to each other means we are willing to listen, to grow, to learn, to care for each other and to be held accountable in both our relationship with God, and to one another.

When Paul encourages us to “speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs”, he is saying encourage each other, build each other up, see the good God has placed in each other, stop griping and complaining and grumbling and learn “to give thanks to God in everything”. (vs 20)

That seems like a good jumping off spot to move into this sermon series, into our first communion of the new year, and into the week ahead. What one thing can you bring to the table this week to better care for your most important relationship this week. Tell God what it is you want to leave behind you in 2018 and what you wish to put on, moving into 2019, and give God thanks.

VIII. Closing Prayer

Let us Pray:

God, as we prepare to come to Your table, search our hearts, see if there is anything going on in our lives holding us back from You. And see if there is any attitude or action, known or unknown that is stifling our most important relationships. And then help us not stay there, Lord, but choose to act, moving from darkness to light and instead of being filled with things that hinder healthy relationships, to be filled with the Spirit, leading us to make wise and healthy choices, living with more thankfulness in our hearts towards You, God, and others. Guide us each day and each week as we grow with You, and in all our relationships for Your glory.

In Jesus' Name,
Amen.