



# LOVE PEOPLE

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# RELATIONALLY ENGAGED

## **The Obvious**

Let's state the obvious.

It may not be necessary, but assumptions are dangerous.

Let's not assume we get something.

Put simply...

To love people we must be in relationship with people.

Yes, this is self-evident.

Yes, we don't need to belabor the point.

But yes, understanding this and doing this are two very different things. Truth be told, with very little effort, we can skirt through our days and skip true relational contact with people, although it won't seem like it because people are everywhere.

We see them on the road.

We walk past them in the stores.

We meet with them at work.

We watch them on TV.

We exchange thoughts with them on the Internet.

We sit beside them in church.

We wave to them in the neighborhood.

We pass them on the running trail.

We sit around them in restaurants.

They're everywhere, which seems good. We don't want to isolate ourselves and be alone. We don't want to live apart from people; but despite this, let's talk reality.

At times, we're lonely.

Others may or may not perceive us as lonely. We, ourselves, may or may not think about it consistently. But when we reflect, when we size-up our relational worlds, in many of life's seasons we are far more isolated than we'd prefer. There's the loneliness associated with literally being alone, and there's the loneliness associated with the relationships we do have. Maybe we lead an organization. We're surrounded by people vying for our time. Leadership, despite the abundance of relationships, can be very lonely.

Maybe we care for small children. We're surrounded by kids and activities. Parenthood, despite the relational demands, can be very lonely.

Maybe we have a group of friends we've known for years. We're surrounded by people who think they know us. Groups of people, despite all appearances, can be very lonely.

We don't set out to be lonely. We don't pull away and put up walls. We don't neglect the actions and activities that would build a healthy, relational world.

Or do we?

Yes, we want to relate.

No, we don't want to relate.

Yes, we want to be known.

No, we don't want to be known.

Yes, we want to be involved.

No, we don't want to be involved.

We are a fickle people who want and crave relational wholeness, but do the oddest things that sabotage our own desires.

## **Escapism**

Let's do a quick assessment—nothing scientific, but a gut-level response to a very significant question. Ask yourself...

*When released from life's obligations, do I live life; or do I watch others live life?*

Let's unpack the question.

Life has its obligations. We work; we take care of our homes; we do the tasks and run the errands. When those things are done, what do we do? Do we engage others and engage life? Or do we live vicariously through the adventures and thrills readily available through the multitude of multimedia? We live in a strange era of human history. While sitting on a couch doing nothing, we can experience adventure, thrill, suspense, and challenge. None of it will be our own



adventure, thrill, suspense, and challenge. All of it will be the observing of life lived out by others.

Our need for competition can be satisfied by cheering a team to victory.

Our need for adventure can be satisfied by reading about other people's risks.

Our need for purpose can be satisfied by watching others engage a mission.

It's an artificial world that can whittle away at our lives by piggybacking off other people's dreams and adrenaline, while never truly living a life of our own.

To be sure, some of us hear this and feel self-justified. We don't escape. We don't avoid. We don't really watch TV, and we don't get lost on the Internet. This may, in fact, be true; but let's be forthright. What else might we use to escape true friendships? Might we escape to work? Might we escape to tasks at home? Might we escape to the running trail, the golf course, or the gym? Yes, many of these have healthy expressions in our lives; and we do have legitimate need for solitude, but there's a difference between healthy solitude and relational isolation. If we're to love people, we must be in relationship with people, which leads to what may be the oddest form of escapism of all.

At times, we escape *from* people *with* people.

Yes, as odd as it may sound, one of the more well-worn escape routes from truly relating to people is the self-justification that comes from the relationships we do have. For some, we escape to a multitude of relationships. We fill our schedules with meetings, appointments, and events, but never truly slow down to talk to anyone. We know plenty of people; but nobody is truly known, including ourselves. On the other end of the spectrum are those of us who escape broader relational circles by pointing to our one or two trusted confidants. We love these friends and they love us, which is good; but something is missing. Our lives lack the significance of being part of something bigger than ourselves. We have great conversations with a select few, but we don't have the rich community that happens when people unite in purpose.

Which leads to a final tension.

## **Tension**

In our relational world, we need both breadth and depth.

If we have relational breadth without relational depth, we will have superficial friendships.

If we have relational depth without relational breadth, we will experience isolation.

This is a tension seen most clearly in the extremes.

If all we have is breadth by being relationally connected to a great many people, there will be high-fives and pats on the back; but there won't be the depth of friendship needed for relational health and personal transformation. A healthy relational context includes a few trusted confidants who know us and who we know well; but on the other side, if we lean so far into a few



close friends at the expense of broader connection, we will isolate ourselves. We will not benefit from the greater community of fellow Christ-followers. Not only will this limit the impact our lives will have in this world, but it will miss the richness of diversity that comes from a broader cross-section of people.

To get the full weight of this, let's gain depth of insight by digging into Scripture. What does Scripture say about both relational depth and relational breadth?

## Relational Depth in Scripture

The critical role of a few soul mates is illustrated by an incident in the life of Moses.

The Israelites are going into battle. They will fight the Amalekites who *"came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim"* (Exodus 17:8). Moses instructed Joshua...

Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands (Exodus 17:9).

The following day, Joshua and crew went into battle; and Moses did as he said he would. He stood on top of a hill with the staff of God in his hands. In doing so, he quickly noticed something odd.

As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning (Exodus 17:11).

So when Moses raised the staff in the air, the Israelites would drive the Amalekites back; but when he lowered the staff, the Amalekites would drive the Israelites back.

It seemed God was making a point. For Israel to win, for them to thrive, they would need to entrust it all to God. Yes, they could swing their swords, but their swords would lack effectiveness if they trusted in their own strength rather than the strength of God.

This would have all been good if it weren't for the reality of fatigue. Scripture tells us that Moses' arms grew tired. He couldn't hold the staff in the air any longer. We might look at this and think, *"Surely God would understand. The point has been made, and they get it. Couldn't Moses now simply submit the whole event to God in his heart and forgo the arm raising bit?"* Evidently, God had a second critical lesson to illustrate.

Scripture tells us that in order to keep the staff raised...

Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset (Exodus 17:12).

Moses wanted to submit it all to God. He wanted to persevere in his faith; but despite his best efforts, he could not do it alone. He needed two people—Aaron and Hur—to stand on either side of him. Together, the three of them hoisted the staff in the air and maintained their submission to God. In time, the battle was won; and they were all, once again, awed by God's power.



That image—Moses with Aaron and Hur standing by his side—is illustrative of a theme we see throughout Scripture and a need we see in our own lives. To live by faith is a battle; and in this battle, God has not designed us to stand alone. The world will come against us. We need trusted confidants to bolster our strength and stay engaged. At times, these confidants will “hold our hands in the air” by listening to our doubts, fears, or concerns. At other times, they will “hold our hands in the air” by speaking truth into our lives, or supporting us when we struggle. God has not designed us to be independent from each other, but interdependent as we bolster and strengthen each other’s resolve to stay fully entrusted to our God. To genuinely stand with each other means we must have depth of friendship. We cannot and need not have this type of friendship with all, but we must have a few trusted friends who know us and whom we know. We are able to tell them what’s truly going on in our lives and put all pretense aside. If we are going to persevere in life’s battles...if we are going to entrust it all to God...we will very often need our own Aaron and Hur to stand beside us, listen to us, and be listened to by us, to keep our arms up and our faith strong.

## David and Jonathan

Scripture offers several examples of these Aaron- and Hur-like moments. One of the more profound is the friendship of David and Jonathan. Saul, Jonathan’s father and king of Israel, sought to kill David. David had to flee for his life. On the run, his faith would be stretched to the limits. How would David maintain his strength in God? How would he “keep his arms in the air”?

Hear carefully how Scripture describes the actions of David’s trusted confidant, Jonathan.

And Saul’s son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God. “Don’t be afraid,” he said. “My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this” (1 Samuel 23:16-17).

What did Jonathan do? He *helped David “find strength in God.”* Or put another way, he stood beside David and helped him lift the staff of God into the air. Left to himself, David could have swirled in his own self-doubt and confusion. He could have been lost to disillusionment and clenched his fist toward heaven. Instead, with the help of his trusted confidant, David was able to maintain his faith and courage.

Life has its battles. There are those seasons where we feel the hot pursuit of our own Saul. We genuinely want to maintain our faith, to raise that staff in the air; but try as we may, our hands drop to our sides and we do not have the strength to raise them. It’s in times like these that we discover whether or not we have done the hard work of establishing our own soul mates. Had David neglected relational depth, he would not have had this friendship to lean into. He would have been both alone and lonely. Relational depth was an essential aspect of his journey.

Which sounds good, and we get it; but then why would we need more than that? Why would we need relational breadth? Relational depth sounds rich and authentic. Do we really need to spread ourselves thin?

Here, as well, let’s consider the Scriptures.



## Relational Breadth in Scripture

A stunning statement is made at the end of the story of Israel and the Amalekites. We previously read that *“Aaron and Hur held [Moses’] hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset.”* The very next line is almost shocking.

So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword (Exodus 17:13).

He did?! Shouldn't the closing line read, *“So Moses overcame the Amalekite army by his faith”*? Here at the end of the story—a story which illustrates that true power is in God and not in the sword—credit is given to the sword? What's that about? The statement is almost insulting. But what if it did read that way? What if the entire commentary was about Moses and his faith? What if the only people mentioned were Moses, Aaron, and Hur? This might seem okay at first, but it wouldn't seem okay if you happened to be one of the soldiers who spent his day risking his life on the battlefield. Yes, Israel won the battle because they entrusted it to God, but this did not happen without an army of soldiers swinging their swords. Over and over, again and again, God works not with isolated individuals, but in and through individuals in the midst of a larger community.

Hear carefully this brief description in Scripture of Christ's larger community.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it (1 Corinthians 12:27).

Lift the hood on this verse and discover that the *“you”* in the line *“you are the body of Christ”* is plural in the original language. Collectively, we represent Christ in the world and to each other. No individual can holistically do this. It's to the collection of all his followers that Christ has given a diversity of gifts. The imagery of his *“body”* is critical to our understanding.

## The Body of Christ

Hear carefully these words from 1 Corinthians.

If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body (1 Corinthians 12:17-20).

If we isolate ourselves from broader community, there are at least three damaging results: We suffer, the body suffers, and the impact of the body is diminished. Hear what Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus.

From [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:16).

The body of Christ is an interdependent body. We all benefit from one another. If we lack relational breadth, we will limit the influence the body of Christ has on our own lives. There will be a time when we need encouragement, but we won't have relationship with a gifted



encourager. Or there will be a time when we need wise counsel, but we won't have relationship with a person who has depth of insight.

Likewise, the body suffers because we, too, have a unique contribution to make. If you're a gifted intercessor, your prayers are limited by disassociation from a broader relational world. This is damaging. The body of Christ needs your prayers. If you're a gifted teacher, your insights will be limited by your context. You won't have the teaching opportunities the body of Christ needs you for. If you're a gifted leader, and you pull back, something is going unled...which is crippling in a multitude of ways. If there is anything we know about the human body, even the seemingly most insignificant parts are painfully missed when absent.

Then there is our collective impact. God did not want to accomplish what he accomplished through Israel by having Moses pray alone on top of a lonely hill. Likewise, God did not want to accomplish what he accomplished through the efforts of one brash soldier. It was through the collective and unified influence of all of them, entrusted to the power of God, that they were able to accomplish something far greater than any individual could ever have done alone. The story is no different today. God is not looking for any other individual, other than Christ, to bring what must be brought to this world. Christ is doing this through us, collectively working together.

Which all makes sense. We get it. We get the need for depth, and we get the need for breadth. So why is it that both are so often challenged? Why do we often avoid depth of friendship? Or on the other extreme, why do we avoid connectedness to a breadth of relationships? Insight into these questions is highly revealing.

## Challenges to Depth

Let's consider relational depth. Why is this challenged? What gets in the way of depth of friendship? To be sure, there is no one answer to this question. For some of us, we just get busy. We get caught up in life's activities and swept away by life's demands. For others, we've had depth of friendship; it was good, but it also took a great deal of energy. We'd like those kinds of friendships, but we also know it takes effort. For others still, we've just not really thought about it but we suspect there's something to it and are cautiously considering what to do about it.

But there's another category, all too common, that demands closer attention.

There is the issue of pain.

Yes, we get it. We get the importance of soul mates, but we also know what it takes to have those relationships. To have those relationships takes vulnerability. We've made ourselves vulnerable before; and in doing so, we got wounded. Maybe it was a friend or spouse who violated our trust. We made ourselves vulnerable to that person, and we were hurt beyond description. Or maybe there was another kind of hurt. Maybe we entrusted ourselves to a person. That person was a good and faithful confidant; but for one reason or another, we lost the relationship. Relationships are lost for a host of reasons. Maybe we opened our hearts to a person, lived in a good and healthy relationship with that person, and tragedy struck. The person passed away. Maybe the challenge was much more practical. The friendship changed because circumstances changed. The person got a new job and had to move across the country. Maybe



we entrusted ourselves to a work colleague, and the relationship got complicated due to dynamics at the office. The reasons vary, and some are more challenging than others; but the net result is quite similar. Past wounds inform our willingness to make ourselves vulnerable again. When we've gone there, and for one reason or another it ended painfully, we're not so sure we want to invest the time and energy to go there again.

How do we address this? What do we do about the reality of *pain* in vulnerable relationships? Do we self-protect and hide ourselves? Do we throw caution to the wind and jump in to any and every relationship? Questions abound, but one insight is critical.

Consider carefully the following two statements.

Wounds, when addressed in a healthy manner, increase our ability to authentically relate to others in deep and meaningful ways.

And wounds, when not addressed in a healthy manner, decrease our ability to authentically relate to others in deep and meaningful ways.

Or put another way, our wounds may be our greatest gift we bring to the other; and conversely, our wounds may be the greatest hardship we bring to the other. Relationships with the wounded, but healed offer a depth of friendship otherwise unavailable. Such is not the case when a wound festers and develops gangrene. Unaddressed and infected wounds will limit our relational capacity significantly. We know both sides of this from our relationships with others. There's something deep and profound about relating to a person weathered by hardship. We want to know and be known by that person; but we also know the reservations we feel about relating to a person who has experienced deep wounds, and it is clear those wounds are active and unhealed. We want to love this person, but we feel the neediness and instinctively step back.

With this in mind, hear carefully Scripture's description of God's heart and actions toward wounds.

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds (Psalm 147:3).

If we hide our wounds—if we keep them to ourselves—our wounds will fester and grow from bad to worse; but if we deal with them honestly—if we bring them before God and others—God will bring about a depth of healing that will only increase our ability to love others. We will bring a depth and humility to our relationships unavailable prior to our wounds. To accomplish this, though, we must be willing to do the very thing we fear doing.

We must open ourselves to depth of relationship.

Or put plainly, the very thing we fear doing because of our woundedness is the very thing that will be instrumental in our healing. No, we do not open our wounds to any and every person; but yes, we find the trusted confidants with whom we can process our pain. There's a fascinating parallel between physical and relational wounds. Physical wounds experience healing when they are cleansed, brought into the open, and given time to heal. When they are not cleansed, and when they are not brought into the open, the physical wound festers and becomes infected.



Likewise, when we cleanse a wound—when we purify it from the effects of bitterness, unforgiveness, cynicism, and distrust—in time, that wound will heal. Yes, there may be lasting acknowledgment of that wound, the scar or the limp, but there will be a relational wholeness and health unmatched by those untested.

## Challenges to Relational Breadth

Challenges to relational breadth are also multifaceted. There is no one reason why we would avoid breadth of relationships. For some, they simply don't like it. They don't like the energy it takes to engage groups of people. Others are put off by the inevitable challenging personalities in any group. They quietly sneak out the "back door" in hopes of avoiding those who irritate them for one reason or another. Others still struggle with disillusionment. Their expectations were not met. They engaged a group of people; and they expected more, but experienced less. Reasons for avoiding breadth of relationships abound, but through them all is a common missing factor.

Simply put, we often lack vision for it and consequently fail to persevere.

We see superficial friendships and quickly check out because we do not see the tremendous importance of a group of people banded together for the good of each other and the good of our cause. Or we get dinged by an off-handed comment and decide participation isn't worth the work. Or maybe we thought it would feel different. We expected a group of people who really felt like family, and it kind of does; but more often, it simply feels like a group of people who happen to know each other...so we go in search of something else. The inevitable reality, though, is that the next group suffers from its own set of challenges. We participate in a particular ministry, group, or church; experience a degree of frustration; and so we search out another. The other feels great at first. They've got it all figured out and are doing what we wished would be done. In time, though, we discover the new group has its own set of weaknesses and shortcomings. At first these weaknesses and shortcomings didn't bother us, but in time they really do; so we show ourselves the door, and repeat the experience. In time, we cycle from one group to another, from one ministry to another, from one church to another. All of them had their strengths, but all of them left us disappointed. Why can't anyone meet our expectations?

Scripture tells us to...

...not become weary in doing good...especially to those who belong to the family of believers (Galatians 6:9-10).

We're to engage, to do good, to serve those who serve Christ. What's most interesting about this statement in Scripture, though, is what comes between the two statements. Hear carefully the full context.

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers (Galatians 6:9-10).

What is it going to take to "*reap a harvest*" among the "*family of believers*"? This harvest demands "*we do not give up.*" To experience what we hunger to experience, to be part of a movement—a



group of people serving each other and those around them—takes perseverance. We must persevere through the inevitable realities of relationships. We must persevere through missed expectations. We must persevere through imperfections and disappointments. If we fail to persevere, we will only experience the same experience negatively recycled again and again; but if we dig in—if we truly engage—in time, we will experience a group of people with whom we are truly doing life, being a family, and making a difference. Spiritual gifts will be more broadly represented. Opportunities for service will be more clearly known. Stories will accumulate of changed lives and service offered. This kind of community is not obtained instantly. It takes years, depth of commitment, and a group of people who will walk through life's ups and downs together. When this is done; and as we “*do good to all people,*” we will, in time “*reap a harvest if we do not give up.*”

## All the More

Scripture calls us to “*hold unswervingly to the hope we profess*” (Hebrews 10:23). To do this is not easy. For this very reason, this very passage exhorts relational connectedness.

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 (Hebrews 10:24-25).

As challenges increase, as our own needs increase, as opportunities to make a difference increase, we must connect with each other “*all the more.*” We must “*spur one another on,*” or put another way, we must love people. We must love each other. We must do the hard work of relating to each other so we can reap the rich harvest that comes from our friendships. To neglect this puts us at risk. We risk *swerving in the hope we profess*, and we risk diminished impact through the body of Christ to whom we are connected. To protect from this diminished experience, we must not only dig deeply into Scripture, we must dig deeply into ourselves. We need depth of insight into our own inclinations. Do we neglect or experience depth of relationships? Do we neglect or experience breadth of relationships? If so, why? What drives us toward or away from people? The Apply experience for this Spiritual Outcome is designed to help us gain depth of insight and answers to these questions.

