

C – Cultivating Accountable Relationships

Galatians 3:23-29

INTRODUCTION

My nine-year-old granddaughter Allie is playing softball on a travel team this summer. I have only been able to see a few of her games since she lives two hours away and travel softball game schedules don't always coincide well with a pastor's schedule.

- Girls' softball games are fascinating case studies in human behavior, and they have been since my own daughter started playing when she was Allie's age.
 - There is just something unique about the combination of pigtails, hairbows and eye black.
 - If you attend a game, you will discover there are far more cheers at a girls' softball game than you will ever hear at boys' baseball game, and those cheers are offered up at loud, screechy pitches that no boys' voice could ever reach – even before he went through puberty.
 - And over the last 25 years, I've heard them all.

Hey, hey, whadda ya' say
Hit the ball the other way!

- New to me, though, is that in this era each girl on every team has a “walk-up song” that plays when they come up to bat.
- A parent brings a karaoke style unit and a recorded announcer says: “Now batting ... Allie!” And then the music plays.
- Allie's walk-up song is “You've Got a Friend in Me,” a song from the Toy Story animated films, sung by Randy Newman – the same guy that sang the intro to the Monk TV show and had a hit song called “Short People.”
- Allie's song fits her personality well. Everybody is her friend. If you ever need a friend, talk to Allie.

As you may know, in my mind I am always writing a sermon, so when I heard Allie's song last week it dawned on me that this is the perfect song for the letter “C” in our Grace Discipleship Pathway acronym. In fact, it ought to be our discipleship walk-up song.

This month we have been reacquainting you with our church's approach to fulfilling the Great Commission's mandate to “make disciples.” We call our approach ...

Growing in G.R.A.C.E.

We have identified the first three letters over the last three Sundays:

- G = Growing in God's Word
- R = Re-telling Your Faith Story
- A = Applying Your Spiritual Gifts

This week is the letter “C” which stands for “Cultivating Accountable Relationships.”

Under the letter “C” we teach that God created His church to be a community of believers, not a cluster of individual islands. That is, God meant for His people to be engaged in deep relationships with other Christians.

- The very word “church” suggests more than one person.
- Individually I am a follower, but when we gather together we become “church,” just as Jesus taught:

For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them. (Matthew 18:20)

Think about it. How many Bible verses do you know that use the phrase “one another”?

- Let me answer my own question. There are 94 of them in the New Testament!
- Here are five of them:
 - Love one another (John 13:34)
 - Pray for one another (James 5:16)
 - Honor one another (Romans 12:10)
 - Serve one another (Galatians 5:13)
 - Encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

How can we do those 94 things if we fail to gather together with one another?

- Christians who isolate themselves from the Body of Christ are like the proverbial log that rolls off the fire; it doesn't take long for the fire to die out. We are built and called to be in Christian community.

Now, back to Allie's walk-up song. Randy Newman has a unique voice, so I can't sing it like he does ... and I can't play it for you either because the livestream will be bumped off the air. But I am allowed to tell you the words. Listen to how close they are to what a community of Christians should be like:

You've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me
When the road looks rough ahead
And you're miles and miles from your nice warm bed
You just remember what your pal said
You've got a friend in me

You've got troubles, and I've got 'em, too
There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you
We stick together and we'll see it through
'Cause you've got a friend in me

And as the years go by
Our friendship will never die
You're gonna see, it's our destiny
You've got a friend in me.

Doesn't that sound like what church ought to be?

Now someone might say: "I can find friends like that anywhere." Maybe.

- A couple of weeks ago George Wendt died. Who is George Wendt? He played Norm on the TV show "Cheers!" In an interview a few years before his death, he said that role on TV led to so many friendships he never had to pay for a beer.

But the kind of friendships that happen in the church as Christians grow and develop into faithful disciples are and should be different and deeper. Remember Matthew 18:20:

For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them. (Matthew 18:20)

In the Galatians passage that was read just a few minutes ago, the dominant phrase was:

So **in Christ Jesus** you are all children of God through faith, for you who were baptized **into Christ** have clothed yourselves with Christ... you are all one **in Christ Jesus**. (Galatians 3:26-28)

The single thing that makes friendships among Christians deeper and better is the fact they are formed **in Christ**.

- That means that in Christ, there is no such thing as a friendship between two people – it is never just you and me. Because you and me make two, and where two Christians gather, Jesus is present also. So it is you and me and Jesus. That makes three.
- You cannot find a friendship like that anywhere else – not even at Cheers!

Our Discipleship Pathway makes it clear that these relationships are not just ordinary friendships.

They are accountable relationships

These are more than simple friendships where pleasantries and handshakes are exchanged. It is more than smiling as you share the peace.

In an accountable relationship between followers of Christ Jesus ...

- Each Christian assumes a bit of responsibility for making sure the others in that relationship continue to remain faithful and grow in their faith.
- These relationships show genuine concern ...
 - when attendance at church is lacking,
 - when attitudes and actions are inappropriate,
 - when questions of faith begin to appear, and so on.

These are relationships that remain present and steadfast when you are miles and miles from your nice warm bed and that remind us that together we will see it through because ... you've got a friend in me.

To help you develop such relationships our G.R.A.C.E. pathway offers three skills and practices.

#1: START HERE AT GRACE CHURCH

First, begin to build friendship-style relationships with people in our congregation.

- Make sure you know those who sit near you in worship.
- Go out to eat with others in church.
- Spend time at fellowship gatherings listening to and getting to know the people at your table.
- Attend Sunday School classes and talk with others about what you are learning.
- Find an area of service, so you have shared experiences together.

One of the descriptions of the early church is recorded in Acts 2:46:

Every day they continued to meet together ... (Acts 2:46)

I'm not saying we ought to do something every day. I am just pointing out that the early Christians lived life together beyond an hour or two on Sunday mornings.

- Building deep friendships with other Christians was a priority for them.
- And if you know anything about what those first Christians had to go through, you can understand why those friendships were so important to them.

#2: PARTICIPATE IN A LIFE-TO-LIFE GROUP

Second, we encourage you to participate in a "Life to Life" group.

In the past you have heard us call these triads. That was a term we used to describe small clusters of people (usually 3-4 and no more) that meet together weekly for a more focused time of Bible study and spiritual growth.

- These triads can use specific curriculum or just meet around an open Bible to read and talk about what the Scriptures say.

A couple of years ago a group of four men decided to form a group like this. After a couple of weeks the wives of these four men decided to meet as well. It was a lot of fun, and they enjoyed being together.

- During that time one of the wives had a significant medical diagnosis.
- It was such a blessing to watch as those women cared for their friend and at the same time those men cared for the husband.

Pastor Brodbeck provides leadership for the formation of triads, so see him if this is of interest to you.

#3: BECOME AN INTENTIONAL RELATIONSHIP BUILDER

Third, we encourage you to become trained as a triad leader. By doing so, you assume responsibility for facilitating the weekly meetings of the triad. Training focuses on the 10

week course "The Ways of the Alongsider." Again, see Pastor Brodbeck if this is of interest to you.

APPLICATION

How important is this aspect of Growing in G.R.A.C.E.? Pastor/theologian John Piper warns about what happens when people neglect this aspect of discipleship. He writes:

"If God designed the Church to function like a body with every member ministering in the power of the Holy Spirit to other members, in regular interpersonal relationship, then would it be surprising to find that the neglect of this regular interpersonal, spiritual ministry cripples the body in some of its functions and causes parts of the body to be weak and sick? Isn't that what you would expect?"

"Psychological problems, marriage problems, parenting problems, self-identity problems, financial problems, career problems, loneliness, addictions, phobias, weaknesses--I wonder if the epidemic of emotional and psychological woes is not the symptom of an organic flaw in the way most Christians experience corporate church life."

Our world, our nation, and every church in every location, needs to have people who are fully engaged in CULTIVATING ACCOUNTABLE RELATIONSHIPS IN CHRIST JESUS.

Will you do it? I pray so. Because as you do, you will keep growing in G.R.A.C.E.!

Amen.