

Taking My Relationships to the Next Level

1. Warm-up: What was the first romantic relationship in your life, and how did it go?
2. Relationships of all types (spouse, kids, parents, friends, coworkers) are really hard. Nothing we are ever asked to do will be harder than sustaining meaningful lifelong relationships. Yet nothing has more potential to bring beauty and grace into our lives.
 - a. What has been one of the most difficult relationships in your life?
 - b. What has been one of the most beautiful relationships in your life?
 - c. Jeff said, “Nothing is more critical to our soul or central to our discipleship than how we related to the people around us.” Do you buy this? Why or why not?
3. On Sunday, we explored three key questions. **First, how does God relate to us?** The principal Old Testament Hebrew word used to describe how God relates to us is *hesed* [KHEH-sed]. It’s a word that has so many layers of meaning, it’s difficult to find a single English word to match it. It takes at least six English words: strong, unending, unconditional, steadfast, merciful lovingkindness.
 - a. As kids, many of us were taught that God relates to us in a very different way. Describe how you were taught God relates to us. How did that understanding of God affect your relationship with God?
 - b. Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of how God relates to us with *hesed* love is found in the book of Hosea. Hosea tells how his wife was unfaithful to him to the point that none of their three children were his. So he separated from her, but ultimately felt led to take her back. Hosea says that God loves us like he loved his unfaithful wife. Hosea pictures God saying to us, “I will take you for my wife forever. I will take you as my wife . . . in steadfast love [*hesed*] and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness.” Hosea 2:19. What do you like about Hosea’s way of describing how God loves us? What do you dislike?
4. The principal New Testament Greek word for how God relates to us is *agape*. There are four different Greek words for love. *Agape* refers to the deepest form of love. It means unconditional, sacrificial love. I John 4:9 puts it this way, “God’s love [*agape*] was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him. This is love [*agape*], not that we loved [*agape*] God, but that God loved [*agape*] us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” Jesus is God’s ultimate expression of *agape* love.
 - a. Have you ever risked your life for someone you loved or know someone who did? What happened and why did you (or they) do it? What did that feel like?
 - b. Given all our shortcomings, why do you think Jesus loves us so much?

- c. As you go about your daily life, are you able to feel that love? If so, how do you experience it? If you don't feel that love, why do you think that is?
5. **Sunday's second question was: How does God want us to related to the people around us?** Jesus answers that question in John 15:12, where he says, "This is my commandment, that you love [*agape*] one another as I have loved [*agape*] you." In other words, we're supposed to imitate Jesus, loving the people around us the way he loved us. This is the single greatest instruction Jesus has for our lives.
- a. Why do you think Jesus chose this as his single greatest instruction to us?
- b. The Puritans called marriage and family "the church within the church." What do you think they meant by that?
6. **Sunday's third questions was: What does it look like when we relate to people the way God does?** The Bible offers a graphic example of what *hesed* and *agape* look like when translated into human relationships. It's found in the story of Ruth and Naomi. Read Ruth 1:1-18, as printed on p. 3.
- a. What did Ruth give up in order to accompany Naomi? What risks did she face?
- b. Why do you think Ruth risked so much and sacrificed so much for Naomi?
- c. The words of Ruth to Naomi in verses 16-17 are regarded as the Bible's ultimate definition of ideal human love. What are the key values embedded in Ruth's vow that we should imitate in our relationships?
- d. Most of us have learned to approach relationships as a form of bargain. I'll give you certain things if you give me certain things. And if you fail to hold up your end of the bargain, the deal's off. By contrast, God calls us to love sacrificially and unconditionally. That's hard to do because everybody we relate to is going to annoy us, disappoint us, let us down, fall short of our expectations, and often hurt us. Henri Nouwen said, "If you allow someone to love you [or you to love someone], that love will take you to painful places." Tell us about a time you've experienced that kind of pain. Was the pain worth it?
- e. God's call for us to embrace unconditional, sacrificial love raises the question why anyone in their right mind would want to love like that. Jesus' answer is found in Luke 6:38, "Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." In other words, deep love has a way of coming back to us. Think of a situation where you (or someone you know) loved unconditionally and sacrificially. What happened? Was it worth it?
- f. Who's someone in your life that you want to love more like God does? What's something specific you can do to express that love more fully to that person?

Ruth 1:1-18

¹In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. ²The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, ⁵both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons or her husband.

⁶ Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had had consideration for his people and given them food. ⁷So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. ⁸But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, ‘Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.’ Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. ¹⁰They said to her, ‘No, we will return with you to your people.’ ¹¹But Naomi said, ‘Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹²Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, ¹³would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.’ ¹⁴Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ So she said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’ ¹⁶But Ruth said,
‘Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
¹⁷ Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!’

¹⁸When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.