

# THE GOOD RETURNS

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## Renewing the Fabric of Friendship

### *Remarkable Relationships (Part 8)*

**Text: Ecclesiastes 4:7-12; John 15:9-17**

Before jumping into our subject for today, I want to encourage those of you who didn't get the chance to hear last week's message to be sure to go to our website and listen to it. I'm convinced that the secret to developing the most remarkable kind of relationships with other people lies in cultivating – first and foremost – a relationship with our Remarkable God. That message will help you with that connection and a hope you'll take the time to enjoy it.

We're closing out this series today and I want to end by giving you a message that I hope you'll find really practical. When I'm looking for practical wisdom, I often turn to the writings of King Solomon – globally renowned as one of the wisest people who ever lived. You may be familiar with some of his Proverbs, but listen to what he writes in the Book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 4 [READ TEXT].

### **The Importance of Friendship**

At the heart of every truly remarkable relationship or life is a deep and satisfying connection with another person that goes by the simple word: "FRIENDSHIP." The best relationships between husbands and wives, adult kids and their parents, or between siblings, workmates, or teams, always have this in common, don't they? They consider each other genuine friends. Even Jesus said that this was the blessing he was out to give his disciples. In one of his final conversations with them before going to the cross, Jesus said: **No longer do I call you servants... Instead, I call you friends (John 15:15).**

It's a sad thing when someone lacks this kind of bonded relationship. In our scripture lesson for today, King Solomon of Israel mourns this reality: **Again I saw something meaningless under the sun. There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth (Ecc 4:7-8).** In other words, I saw this person whose life was consumed with work and wealth and yet neither brought him contentment. He may have had a lot of people around him, but he had nobody who really shared his life. He was active and affluent but "all alone." He lacked a true friend.

Friendship isn't just the key to overcoming loneliness when we're by ourselves; it is also the secret to overcoming the challenge of living with one another. When the fabric of friendship is strong, it can bear the winds and worries that beset a relationship. When the fabric of friendship gets weak and worn, however, it is only a matter of time before

the inevitable pressures of our imperfections and life's difficulties bring the kite of our connection down. This is why if we are trying to renew a faltering relationship (or to prevent such failure in the first place) it pays to make sure that we are investing in *four particular practices* by which the Bible teaches that friendships grow.

## The Practice of Playing

The first of those investments is suggested by the question Solomon poses in Ecclesiastes 4:8. **For whom am I toiling, he asked, and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment? This too is meaningless-- a miserable business!** Sometimes, this is what life feels like, doesn't it? It feels like every day is a parade of meaningless toil and misery and that the people closest to us are part of the problem.

I think back to a time like this in my marriage, when the fabric of love between Amy and me had worn particularly thin. We were both in school, working at jobs, and struggling with young children and money. It was easy to look at our spouse and think: He or she is part of our problems and, of course, we were! About that time, a seasoned couple in our church asked if we'd like to go away and use their vacation home for a few days. Frankly, we weren't sure we wanted to be cooped up together for that long, especially when there were all these needs back home. But the couple kept pressing. They said they'd come in and take care of our kids and the dog. It felt awkward in the face of such kindness not to say yes. And so we went.

It wasn't pretty at first. We hadn't had that kind of face time together for years. There were a lot of issues between us that needed reconciliation, but our energy for talking was low. And so, we just rested. We took naps and walked on the beach. We went swimming, and out for dinner, and home to bed early. It went like this for several days. And then this strange thing happened. We started to look at each other and feel: *"Oh, I remember you. We used to have fun like this a lot. We used to be really good friends."* And we started to really talk again.

I've seen the same process unfold in my workplace over the years. I remember a period when our staff team was feeling particularly on-edge with each other. Many felt under-appreciated or irritated by their differences with others. We scheduled a staff retreat up in Woodstock and everyone groaned. *"Oh, do we have to go – with these people – when there's so much work to be done."* And then we were off on the retreat and we wound up bowling together. We did this wild car rally scavenger hunt. We started to relax and laugh and remember how good we felt when we first signed on with this crew.

**Why are you depriving yourself of enjoyment?** God is asking some of us today. Don't you realize that no relationship becomes or stays remarkable without the practice of PLAY? How can you restore that part of the kite of connection with some important people in your life? Maybe it's time to plan an overnight away together or a real

vacation. Perhaps you need to take a ballroom dancing class, or sign-up for sailing lessons, or pursue some other interest where both of you are incompetent learners. Maybe you ought to watch more comedy movies or watch me play golf, just so you can do some laughing together.

Go on a walk together this afternoon. Plan a dinner party with people you love or would like to get to know. Go to a funeral or visit a nursing home together and remember how good it is just to be alive, to be as healthy as you are now, and to have someone next to you to share the adventure. Stop by a car dealership and take a convertible out for a test drive. Volunteer together at a children or youth ministry event and remember what it looks like, what it feels like, to be someone who actually *plays* with and enjoys their *friends*.

### **The Practice of Lifting**

Then consider the second piece of counsel Solomon offers in verse 10 of this passage. **If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! (Ecc 4:10)** Neil Jacobson is a clinical psychologist at the University of Washington. He found in his research that most relationships suffer critical injury not so much from the direct pressures *within* the bond as from the pressures that come upon the relationship from the *outside*.<sup>1</sup> Let's face it: This world beats people up. Work wears us down. Financial demands weigh upon us. The callousness or criticism of people we meet in other spheres of life drives us lower and lower, till we have little to give to our most important relationships.

This is why one of the most important practices some of us need to learn is simply to ask the question: "How was your day? How is it really going?" And then, truly listen. Don't try to solve the problem. Just share the burden. Express some empathy. **9]** Let this weary person you're speaking with know that if this world has beaten them down or they've fallen down, they've got a friend -- someone there to "help them up."

Back in September, I cast a vision for our congregation that involved each of us doing something to LIFT up one other person each week. Jacobson found that couples who routinely helped LIFT each other's spirits in the face of the pressing weight of life's wear and worries were dramatically more successful in preserving their relationship than those who didn't bother. Are you practicing this particular discipline of friendship with the people closest to you? This is the way of Jesus, said the Apostle Paul: We are to **bear one another's burdens, and in this way... fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2)**.

### **The Practice of Warming**

Or think about getting even better at the third practice of friendship. Solomon is getting at this one when he writes: **Also, if two lie down together, they will keep**

**warm. But how can one keep warm alone? (Ecc 4:11)** Before I marry a couple, I ask them to tell me exactly what it is that they cherish about each other. I write it down. I feed it back to them on their wedding day. And then I give them a copy of it. I encourage them to read those words again when times get tough. And, you know what, times always get tough. Degree-by-degree, our own sin and the pull of this broken world always pulls us apart. There comes a day in almost every relationship when we are so far from one another that we feel terribly cold. And it is then that we need to WARM one another.

Legendary marital therapist, John Gottman, writes: "Fondness and admiration are two of the most crucial elements in a rewarding and long-lasting romance. Although happily married couples may feel driven to distraction at times by their partner's personality, they still feel that the person they married is worthy of honor and respect."<sup>2</sup> That's why Gottman's number one strategy for helping couples in marital trouble is NOT to plumb their problems with each other. It to get them, figuratively or literally, to "**lie down together**" as King Solomon suggests. Gottman asks them to get close to one another and do one of the following exercises each day to heat up the fondness and admiration they've simply become too frozen to feel like they once did.

Here's a list of some of his exercises. Feel free to try these at home, at work, wherever relationships seem hard: Describe one character trait or physical attribute you find endearing or lovable about the other. Think of a good time in your relationship and talk about what was so good about it. Name one thing about the other that makes you proud. Describe one strong value, belief, or interest you two have in common and why it is important to you. Talk about a common goal you once had or could still forge together. Describe a time when you felt very supported by the other. Tell the story of your meeting and why you decided to bind your lives to one another in the first place. Discuss a vacation or play time you remember sharing together and what was so special about it. Describe one thing the other person does that makes your life easier or one clear benefit of your relationship. Talk about one thing you planned or produced together that turned out successfully. Name one difference between you that you've managed to adapt to successfully. Describe a tough time that you managed to weather together. Think of another love, work, social, or family relationship you've seen in worse shape than yours and rejoice that life together isn't *that* bad!

You know, John Gottman wasn't the first to counsel this. St. Paul saw this before him: **Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure... lovely... admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things... And the God of peace will be with you (Phil 4:8-9)**. If you want a relationship that is filled more with a sense of peace than of problems, think on these things and see if it doesn't warm up that old affection.

## **The Practice of Defending**

Finally, I want to encourage all of us to work at the fourth practice of friendship that Solomon commends. It is simply this: Defend the people close to you. Solomon writes: **Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves (Ecc 4:12).** Now, I want to qualify what I'm about to say, because we live in an age where some parents defend their kids to a fault, when what they ought to be doing is helping their children *confront* their faults. But, that said, we will never have truly remarkable relationships with them until our children, spouses, and co-workers know, beyond a shadow of a doubt that, at the core, we've got their back. They need to have memories of times when you stood up for them as others were standing against them, when you believed the best of them as others were suspecting the worst. Amidst a world of people who are ambivalent about them or actively arrayed against them, do the people closest to you know that God has appointed you part of their strong defense?

### Conclusion

Let me close by saying that I know it's not easy to do any of the things I've been talking about this morning or throughout this series. It's certainly not easy to prioritize play in a culture of toil. It's not easy to lift others up when we ourselves feel down. It's not easy to warm up affection when the connection has gone cold. It's not easy to defend imperfect people instead of joining the attack. But as hard as it is, these kinds of behaviors are what renew the fabric of friendship. And God's Word promises that people who invest in building friendship will **"have a good return for their work."**

As far away as the good in some of your connections has gone, you can see it return. You can leave behind the world of *regular* relationships and enter into the kingdom of God's *remarkable* ones. I hope this series has helped all of us move a bit further in that direction. For this is the call of Jesus and our destiny, to which all of us I pray will say: "Amen."

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<sup>1</sup> John Gottman, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 87.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.63.