

Becoming Relationally Alive

Rich Nathan
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Fully Alive
Philippians 1:27-2:5

For those of you who have been here over the past several weeks, you know that we are in the middle of a discipleship campaign titled, “Fully Alive”. Many of you have gotten involved in one of our Fully Alive small groups. Right now, we have about 850 Fully Alive small groups operating in the central Ohio community. I’ve even heard that a few started up in other states.

Before I talk about this week’s topic about becoming relationally alive, I want to mention two relationship realities.

Relationship realities

The first reality is that we are more divided than we were in the past. The second reality is that we are more isolated than we were in the past.

We are more divided than in the past

Virtually every political analyst, whether they are coming from the right, the center or the left, has commented on the growing partisan divide in America right now. Consider

the last presidential election. American voting was radically divided by race, by gender, by education, by age and even by geography.

For instance,

African-Americans voted for Clinton by an 80 point margin (88% to 8%)

Hispanics voted for Clinton by a 36 point margin

White non-Hispanics voted for Trump by a 21 point margin (58% to 37%)

The gender gap was the widest since 1972.

Women supported Clinton over Trump by 54% to 42%

Men supported Trump over Clinton by 53% to 41%

The education gap was the widest since 1980.

College grads backed Clinton 52% to 43%

Non-college grads backed Trump 52% to 44%

There was a greater urban vs. rural divide than at any time since 1920.

Clinton won 88 of America's 100 largest counties

Trump won virtually all of America's rural counties

More Americans than ever are living in think-alike communities. We are sorting ourselves ideologically by zip code. Liberals live in these zip codes. Conservatives live in those zip codes. Americans are not only divided politically, we are divided around moral and social issues. We're divided in our view of abortion. In our view of gun rights. In our view of immigration, global warming, same-sex marriage, health care – name the issue and you'll find an enormous difference of opinion.

Does anyone here think that we are NOT a divided nation?

We're not only more divided than we were in the past, we are also more isolated.

We are more isolated than in the past

Just a few years ago, there was a very disturbing study which indicated that more Americans than ever have no one that they can confide in regarding personal problems and troubles. There are some things we only discuss with people who are very close to us. And nearly one-quarter of all Americans say that there is no one in their lives who they can talk to about really important matters. There is no one they can use as a sounding board for very personal matters. The average American has only 2 non-family members to confide in.

Dr. Malarkey, who is a clinical researcher at the Ohio State University College of Medicine and who spoke here last week, has done research on isolation and loneliness. His research indicates that being isolated will result in a person being much more unhealthy. Being isolated activates the genes that are responsible for inflammation and it turns down the activity of genes that produce antibodies to fight infection.

Being isolated makes a person feel constantly on alert. If you are lonely, you go through life on high alert, which destroys your health. Let me give you some frightening statistics.

- Isolation is associated with a 29% increased risk of a heart or angina attack
- Isolation is associated with a 32% increased risk of having a stroke
- Isolation is as potent a cause of early death as smoking 15 cigarettes a day
- Isolation is twice as deadly as obesity
- Isolation increases the risk of dementia, high blood pressure, alcoholism and accidents

In short, we human being were not designed to go it alone. You know when we violate God's design in any area of life – spiritually, physically, relationally, emotionally, and financially – when we violate God's design in any area of life – we hurt ourselves. The individualistic, isolated mindset of America that devalues deep relationship and

devalues face-to-face friendships with people that we can share anything with, our isolated approach to life is literally killing us.

We're divided from each other. We're isolated from one another. We all have relationships maritally, with family members, with neighbors, in the work place, in school, and online that are incredibly unhealthy.

How can these relationships be healed? Today, as I continue this Fully Alive series, I want to talk about "Becoming Relationally Alive".

Let's Pray.

Philippians 1:27-2:5

²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel

²⁸ without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. ²⁹ For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus

The context for the Apostle Paul's appeal for relational healing is simply this: two prominent members in the church in Philippi, two leaders, two co-workers of Paul were quarreling with one another. We read about that in chapter 4:2

Philippians 4:2

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.

So, these two women, Euodia and Syntyche, were at odds. Their dispute appears to have infected the rest of the church. Now I'm going to start with the negative today. There are two things the Apostle Paul mentions that destroys relationships. They'll almost always be present when you have a bad relationship. Then I'm going to talk about four things that heal relationships.

Paul speaks about two things that destroy relationships.

Relationship destroyers

Slide Philippians 2:3-4

³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

The first relationship destroyer is selfishness. The second is vain conceit, which literally should be translated “empty opinion”.

The Apostle Paul says first of all that

Relationships are destroyed by selfishness

Philippians 2:3

³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,

Philippians 2:4

⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Paul is talking about the me-first attitude. In almost every broken relationship, you're going to have at least one of the parties, if not both, adopting a me-first, self-centered attitude.

Eugene Peterson, one of the great spiritual writers of our day, wrote this in his book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*:

Our culture encourages and rewards selfish ambition without qualification. We are surrounded by a way of life in which betterment is understood as expansion, as acquisition, as fame. Everyone wants to get more for themselves. To be on top, no matter what it is the top of, is admired.

There is nothing recent about this temptation. It is the oldest sin in the book, the one that got Adam thrown out of the Garden and Lucifer tossed out of Heaven. What is fairly new about it is the general admiration and approval that it receives.

What throws sand into the gears of our relationships is what the Apostle Paul calls selfish ambition. It is this culturally approved viewpoint that we always must end up on top, that we've always got to win, that we've always got to expand. There is no current limit in America to our selfish ambition for more, whatever more may be.

The opposite of the me-first attitude is you-first. I will defer to you. It's the attitude that the Old Testament patriarch Abraham adopted with his nephew, Lot. Abraham's

employees were fighting with Lot's employees over grazing land for their flocks. How did Abraham heal the dispute?

Genesis 13:8-9

⁸ So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are close relatives. ⁹ Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left."

Rather than me first, Abraham said you first. "I will defer to you." It's almost impossible to be in a bad relationship with people who defer to you and are willing to let you go first. It's hard to keep fighting with someone who says, "I will get out of the way and let you choose." Isn't that frustrating when someone does that?

What if those of us Type A go-getters disciplined ourselves to defer to others? Here's a spiritual discipline. What if you let other cars get in front of you on the way out of the church parking lot? What if you let cars get in front of you that were trying to cut in to your lane as you're driving or trying to enter the road from a gas station or a restaurant parking lot? Talk about a spiritual discipline – not me first, you first – even when we're driving.

Extroverted people like me, what if we disciplined ourselves to listen more and speak less? Not me first, you first! Here's a spiritual discipline. What if in conversations with others or in meetings at work or when we're eating with someone we actually put our phones away and paid attention to what others were saying even when it wasn't particularly interesting to us? Not me first, you first!

The first relational destroyer is selfishness, me-first. Paul goes on and says that

Relationships are destroyed by empty opinion

Philippians 2:3

³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,

Vain conceit is literally empty opinion. Have you ever argued with someone and you kept the argument going even though you really had no basis for your opinion? You don't really know what the facts are. You know that the more you talk the less sense you're making. You just adopted a certain opinion without much thought, without any real research because that's the opinion of people who are in your group, people you identify with, people who have your political affiliation or you are hurt and you really don't remember the situation or your religion nearly as well as you're pretending to remember. Empty opinion.

Is it not pride that drives so much empty opinion? We just don't want to admit that we don't know what we're talking about. We don't really understand this particular area, it's too complicated. We're making things up as we go. We've never really thought about it or read about it, but we're stubbornly dug in.

How many arguments would be ended by the simple acknowledgement that – “Well, I don't know very much about this. I don't really remember. You may be right!”

Now, what are relationship healers?

Relationship H.E.A.L.ers

I'm using the word heal as an acronym. What are relationship healers?

H – Hold on to the gospel

Slides Philippians 1:27

²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel

As I said earlier, there was a dispute between two prominent women in the church in Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche, that threatened to divide the church. How does Paul bring healing between these two women and bring the two warring factions together? What he doesn't do is offer these folks the kind of relational counsel that is so popular today.

How many of you have heard the advice that if you want to end a dispute, use "I" statements, not "you" statements? Don't say, "You are a slob". Instead, say "I feel angry and disrespected when I have to pick up your clothes." Don't say, "You are an inconsiderate, self-absorbed pig". Instead, say "Darling, I feel lonely and disconnected when you choose to hang out with your friends at the corner bar every night instead of coming home from work."

Rather than deal with the symptoms of our disputes, namely, the way that we communicate, rather than deal simply at the behavioral level or offering people a few techniques, Paul goes right to the root of our disputes. Very often, when you see a relational breakdown between Christians, one or both parties is failing to hold on to the gospel. They are failing to think through the implications of the gospel that saved them at the beginning.

Paul went everywhere in the Roman Empire preaching one message. He preached the gospel. The message that God's long awaited kingdom had broken into the world in and

through Jesus of Nazareth. He went everywhere preaching that Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfillment and completion of the story of Israel.

God brought the story of Israel to this grand climax in Jesus and it was through Jesus' sinless life, his sacrificial death, his glorious resurrection, his gift of the Holy Spirit and his future return that everyone in the world, both Jew and Gentile, who turned to Jesus in faith and repentance would find ultimate salvation from everything that keeps us in bondage – whether it's sins or addictions or demonic powers or fear and anxiety. Everything that controls us. Everything that locks us up and keeps our lives in chains. Paul went everywhere announcing good news! God has done everything necessary to set you free from all the powers that are keeping you down and ruining your life and you can receive that good news by turning to Jesus in faith and repentance.

How does this work practically? How does holding on to the gospel and thinking through the implications of the gospel bring healing to our relationships? Let's say that you are having a fight with someone. How does the gospel work to heal that fight? When I reflect on the gospel, I reflect on what the gospel says about me. The gospel doesn't just say that I'm a little less than perfect. The gospel tells me that I must be really bad indeed, if the only way God could save me was by stepping out of heaven, being born into the family of a poor carpenter, becoming a refugee when the Holy Family had to flee from the Promised Land down to Egypt because they were persecuted by an evil king.

It took the Son of God being misunderstood his whole life, being rejected by most people, being betrayed by one of his closest friends, being spit on, being mocked, being publicly stripped and beaten, being tortured, being nailed to a cross and being separated from the one that he was united to for all eternity – God the Father. It took the bloody, excruciating sacrificial death of the Son of God to save someone like me.

When I reflect on what the gospel says about me – I’m not as put together, as wonderful as I like to imagine – when I’m fighting with someone and I reflect on what the gospel says about the person I’m fighting with, namely that God must love them so much and love me so much that he sent his one and only Son into the world to save us – friend, that does something to my heart! When I think through the gospel, it changes my heart toward myself. It changes my heart toward this other person.

What are relationship healers? H – hold on to the gospel. Here’s the second thing if we want to heal our relationships:

E – Embrace your new citizenship

In Philippians 1:27, the Apostle Paul says this:

Slide Philippians 1:27

²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel

Do you know that the Bible was not originally written in English? The New Testament was originally written in Greek. The word that the NIV translates “conduct yourselves” is the Greek word

Politeuesthe = citizenship

This is an unusual word in the New Testament. It occurs only twice in the New Testament. In Greek literature, it literally means to have one’s citizenship or one’s home in a certain city or a certain country. You can see from the prefix of *politeuesthe* that its where we get the word political from. Why does Paul use this very unusual term in dealing with a conflict, a dispute that’s threatening to split the Philippian church?

If you go back in history, you’ll find out that Philippi was settled by retired Roman soldiers. These were all people who were very proud of their citizenship in Rome. They were highly patriotic, the kind of people who would march down High Street in a 4th of July parade. The kind of folks who would hang a flag out in front of their home on regular occasions. The Apostle Paul reminds these highly patriotic Roman citizens of this truth in Philippians 3:20-21.

Philippians 3:20-21

²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Here's what Paul is saying. If you claim to be a Christian then your most important citizenship and allegiance is no longer to your city of birth, to your state, even to the nation, whose military you served in. Your most important allegiance is to the Kingdom of God and to Jesus Christ as Lord. To call Jesus Lord is to swear allegiance to him and his way of doing life.

How does this heal our disputes? What's Jesus' way of life that I've sworn allegiance to? In place of holding a grudge, Jesus tells me to forgive. In place of vengeance, Jesus tells me to show mercy. In place of hatred, Jesus calls me to love. Friend, what would it mean for you in all of your dealings, especially with those you are at odds with, what would it mean for you to say about yourself, "I am a new creation! I am a citizen of the Kingdom of God. Jesus is my Lord and I'm going to approach this dispute the way Jesus wants me to." How might that bring healing?

What are relationship healers? H – hold on to the gospel. E – embrace your new citizenship. And

A – Accept the love of God

Here's what we read:

Slide Philippians 2:1-2

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,
² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.

We bring health to our relationships by first starting with our own individual connection to God. Many people try to have healthy relationships, but they themselves are far from God. Paul is saying that you have no hope for a healthy relationship with another person unless you are personally tied into an intimate relationship with God that's making a real difference in our lives. It's not enough to just come to church and try to be a nice person. We have no hope of healing our relationships unless we presently have a relationship with God that's making a real difference. You see, we cannot give out of what we do not have. We are not the source of healthy relationships. We can't give encouragement to someone else while we ourselves are discouraged. We can't comfort someone else in their pain while we ourselves are burned out and exhausted and irritated.

But you know, not only can't we give out of what we ourselves do not have, but often there is a great deal of un-health in our relationships because we are trying to get from other people what we can only get from God. Do you know this one? Let's look at these phrases in Phil. 2:1 one at a time. The apostle Paul writes,

Philippians 2:1a

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ...

Let's be honest and say that we all need encouragement. We need to be affirmed. We need to be approved of. All of us need to be applauded and cheered on in the jobs we do, the efforts we make, in the kind of people that we are. There is a deep human need in all of us to be affirmed and to be approved of. But who is ultimately going to meet that need for affirmation and approval in you or me?

Should I be upset with you because you didn't come along and pat me on the back enough and say, "Attaboy, Rich. Nice job. You are doing great." Should you be upset with me or someone else because we didn't notice your effort? Because we don't cheer you on enough?

Friends, there is no applause – not from your parents, not the well-done you've always been seeking from your mother or father, brother or sister, spouse or boss, or your

friends, or your pastor. There is no applause that will ever meet your deepest need for encouragement and affirmation other than hearing the applause from the nail-scarred hands of Jesus. What we all need – at the deepest level of our beings is a “well done, good and faithful servant” from Jesus himself. We need to be approved of by Jesus.

We read the second phrase in v. 1,

Philippians 2:1

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love....

I need comfort; you need comfort. There are places in our lives that need to be healed and fixed. Hurts that we have been dragging from childhood on into our adulthood. Places where we’ve been rejected. Pain, sometimes unspeakable pain, that we’ve suffered. Wounding words; sometimes grief from the loss of a loved one. Many places where we ourselves have suffered self-inflicted wounds. We will never receive the depth of comfort to fix and heal us from other people. I cannot come to you and you cannot come to me – we cannot come to each other and say, “Here is a bill for my life because of what my dad did to me; because of what my mother, or my ex, or the girls in high school did to me – now fix me.”

Only God the Father can give us what we need in terms of healing and consolation and comfort.

And we need fellowship. The apostle Paul says in v. 1,

Philippians 2:1

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit....

Or more literally,

If any fellowship in the Spirit...

Again, we can't turn to one another and say, "I am lonely. You must relate to me. It is your job to relieve me of these intense feelings of loneliness."

I sometimes hear complaints from individuals who have gone to one of our small groups and said, "You know, I go to the group, but I still don't have the depth of relationship that I need. Oh, it was all very nice and people at the group seemed kind, but I need more. I'm still lonely."

I want to tell you, brothers and sisters, that no amount of human relationship can ever touch that deep place of inner loneliness in us that is designed for fellowship with the Holy Spirit alone. Only God himself can fill the hole in your heart that is designed for him.

How do we heal our relationships? Here's the last thing:

L – Live according to the example of Jesus

Here's what we read:

Philippians 2:5

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus

How did Jesus heal the broken relationship that existed between God and us? We have sinned against God. We owed God a debt that we couldn't pay. To heal the relationship, God decided to pay our debt himself. This is always what is required in healing a relationship. Someone must pay the debt that's owed. Someone must bear the cost. If you break a lamp in my house, I can make you pay for it or I can forgive your debt which means that I bear the cost of the broken lamp myself.

Friends, what would it look like if you and I lived according to the example of Jesus?

What if we said, compared to the enormous debt that Jesus forgave me of what this person owes me is a small thing? I'm going to choose the way of Jesus and forgive.

How many of our relationships might be healed?

H – hold on to the gospel

E – embrace your new citizenship

A – accept God's love for you

L – live according to the example of Jesus

This is what it takes to become relationally alive.

Let's pray.

Becoming Emotionally Alive

Rich Nathan

March 18 & 19, 2017

Fully Alive

Philippians 1:27-2:5

I. Relationship realities

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B. We are more isolated than in the past

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A. H - Hold on to the gospel

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