

MBC WOMEN'S STUDY

RELATIONSHIPS: A MESS WORTH MAKING

WINTER/SPRING 2025/26

Class 1: Chapters 1 & 2

INTRODUCTION TO THE SEMESTER

- This year is going to be about relationships and how God desires His people to come along side one another for more than just surface level conversations.
- Specifically, we are going to be talking about biblical relationships and friendships that Christians have with one another.
- Why is this important or why should we be spending our time talking about relationships and friendships within the church?
- God did not make us to be alone. He did not have a plan in place for us so that we would do this life without someone else for us.
- This may look like a husband or wife; it can also be a someone who is a close friend.
- Each of us have been created in the image of God and thus created for relationships with one another.

Here are some thoughts about our relationship

- Millard Erickson observes about the image of God in man, “If we understand the image to consist in personal relationships, our ministry will emphasize “relational theology” and small group interaction.”¹
 - Notice the emphasis that Erickson puts on *relational theology* which comes from a proper understanding of God’s image in man.
- Michael Horton explains, “...the Bible places human beings in a dramatic narrative that defines their existence as inherently covenantal – full engaged with God, with each other...”²
 - The point is simple, part of being made in the image of God means that man is to have interactions with one another; based solely on creation.
- Paul Tripp further points out regarding man and being made in the image of God, “So to be made in the image of God surely means that we are made for community. We are made to dwell in willing dependent relationship to God and others. In other words “made in the image of God,” we have the seeds of the two

¹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 459.

² Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith, A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims On the Way*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 380.

Great Commands. I will fully live out the image, which the Creator has stamped on me, only when I love God above all else and love my neighbor as myself.”³

- Notice that Tripp says *willing* and *dependent* when describing the relationship that we have with God and with one another. He also talks about the two great commandments...we are to love God with all we have and love others as we already love ourselves.
- John MacArthur explains, “...the image of God explains mankind’s capacity to live in relationship with others. Thus, man is designed in the image of God as a relational being, who is not only able to relate to other people and to God in a loving way but is also required to do so in order to experience fulfillment (Gen. 2:18, 22–24).”⁴
 - Since God has created man for relationships and that is part of His image in man, people are going to naturally look for community in different places. This is not just for the same sort of companionship but, as MacArthur puts it, it is to *experience fulfillment*.
- Tim Challies points out, “We have seen that community is a foundational part of God’s design for humans. It should then come as no surprise that it is also foundational to the church.”⁵
 - Understanding that being made in the image of God means that mankind is going to seek community and fellowship somewhere.
- The list could go on and on, but one thing is certain, all of mankind seeks out relationships and because of the fall, all our relationships are going to have problems.
- You are not going to have a relationship with someone that is free from sin because you are not free from sin.
- This means, as Tripp says throughout the first chapters, that because of sin we have the opportunity to see God’s amazing grace work in our own hearts and in the hearts of those who we are in relationship with.

Bible Verses About Friendships and Relationships

- **Proverbs 17:17** “A friend loves at all times, And a brother is born for adversity.”
 - The difference between a friend and brother is noted here. A true friend is a constant source of love, while a brother in one’s family may not be close, but is drawn near to help in trouble. Friends are closer than brothers because they are available all the time, not just in the crisis.⁶

³ Paul David Tripp, *Do You Believe: 12 Historic Doctrines to Change Your Everyday Life*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 233.

⁴ John MacArthur, *Essential Christian Doctrine: A Handbook on Biblical Truth*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 226.

⁵ Tim Challies, “One Another – The Bible & Community,” @challies, 10 July 2004, <https://www.challies.com/articles/one-another-the-bible-community/>

⁶ John F. MacArthur Jr., *The MacArthur Study Bible: NASB* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006), Pr 17:17.

- **Proverbs 18:24** “A man of too many friends comes to ruin, But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”
 - The chapter closes with an important insight: those who fail to develop deep friendships with a few and have only superficial friendships with many **may come to ruin**. One friend who develops deep loyalty and affection (**love**), in times of trouble, will **stick closer than a brother**.⁷
- **Proverbs 27:9** “Oil and Perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel.”
 - The blessing of having friends whose **counsel** is substantive (**earnest**), is described as **sweet oil and perfume**.⁸
- **Proverbs 27:17** “Iron sharpens iron, So one man sharpens another.”
 - **Iron sharpens iron.** The benefits of intellectual and theological discussion encourage joy through a keener mind and the improvement of good character which the face will reveal.⁹
 - There is a play on the Hebrew verbs in verse 17. The first means to **sharpen**, the second to **brighten**. The idea seems to be that one is made keener by contact and discussion, but the emphasis in the second line seems also to stress the joy such contact brings to both. Neither idea negates the other. The need for and the value of friendship is in view.¹⁰
 - No Christian can be a loner and not suffer for it. God made us social beings; we need one another. The loner always turns out to be weird, miserable, etc.¹¹
- **Ecclesiastes 4:9-12** “Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.”
 - The need for someone with whom to share the good things of life (vv. 7–8) prompts a discussion on friendship. Several benefits of friendship are enumerated (cf. Gen 2:18).
 - **4:9** First, two can work better than one and so have a larger profit. Note the proverbial form.
 - **4:10** Second, they can help each other in time of need.
 - **4:11** Third, they give emotional comfort to each other. The warmth of lying beside each other does not refer to sexual activity, nor are the two necessarily husband and wife. It is an image derived from

⁷ Jay E. Adams, *Proverbs*, The Christian Counselor’s Commentary (Cordova, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 150.

⁸ Ibid., 205.

⁹ MacArthur Jr., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, Pr 27:17.

¹⁰ Adams, *Proverbs*, 206.

¹¹ Ibid.

that of travelers who must lie beside each other to stay warm on cold desert nights. But the usage is here metaphorical for emotional comfort against the coldness of the world.

- **4:12** Fourth, they give each other protection; for that, in fact, a third friend is even better! This verse also appears to be a proverb (note the numerical pattern).¹²
- Since our friends have a deep impact upon us, we must be careful about who we choose are friends.
 - **Proverbs 12:26** “The righteous is a guide to his neighbor, But the way of the wicked leads them astray.”
 - **Proverbs 13:20** “He who walks with wise men will be wise, But the companion of fools will suffer harm.”
 - **Proverbs 16:27-29** “A worthless man digs up evil, While his words are like scorching fire. A perverse man spreads strife, And a slanderer separates intimate friends. A man of violence entices his neighbor And leads him in a way that is not good.”
 - **Proverbs 27:6** “Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.”
- The New Testament does not talk about friendship as much as the Old Testament does, but it does give us the foundation and example for what true friendship looks like.
 - **John 15:12-15** “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.”
 - This gives the heart or core of what true friendship is based upon...sacrificial love for one another.
 - While we may never be called to sacrifice our physical life for someone, we are certainly called to sacrifice our own selfish wants in order to truly love one another.
- Here are some key concepts which are found in the NT regarding friendship.¹³
- **Sacrificial Love:**
 - Jesus sets the ultimate example of friendship by laying down his life for his friends. This concept of sacrificial love is the model for how believers should treat one another.
 - This is found in the above reference **John 15:12-15**.
- **Mutual Encouragement:**
 - The New Testament encourages believers to "stir up one another to love and good works" and to meet together to encourage each other's faith.

¹² Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 308.

¹³ Some of this list and some ideas taken from a variety of websites and compiled using the AI Gemini .

- Hebrews 10:24 “...and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds...”
- **Avoiding Negative Influence:**
 - Warnings are given to avoid becoming friends with those who are wicked or given to anger, as bad company can corrupt one's character.
 - **1 Corinthians 15:33** “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company corrupts good morals.’”
- **Building Community:**
 - The importance of meeting together for encouragement and support is highlighted, reflecting the deep human need for fellowship and mutual support.
 - **Hebrews 10:25** “...not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”
- God has created us to have relationships and friendships and has also given us the foundation for them, Jesus Christ, and the parameters for them, and the power to follow what He has commanded.

CHAPTER 1: THE SHORTEST AND MOST IMPORTANT CHAPTER OF THIS BOOK

- I only want to highlight and discuss some of the points in the first chapter¹⁴:
 - “We decided that our only choice was to trust Christ the way we ask others to, and give him an opportunity to work *in* us so that he would work *through* us.” (4)
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- “We need God’s grace to save us from ourselves...but hope that rests in Christ.” (4)
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- “We are well aware that we are smack-dab in the middle of God’s process of sanctification. And because this is true, we will struggle again. Selfishness, pride, an unforgiving spirit, irritation, and impatience will certainly return...Yet, amid the mess, we find the highest joys of relationship and ministry.” (4)
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¹⁴ Page numbers for direct quotes are in parentheses after the quote.

- “He is near, with, and in you. This means there is hope for you, even in relationships that leave you confused and disappointed.” (5)
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CHAPTER 2: WHY BOTHER?

- After seeing all the Bible has to say about relationships it seems that they should be sought after with all the strength that we have.
 - There are many reasons why we should desire deep relationships, but there are many factors that keep us from fully pursuing them with one another as well.
 - “You’ve felt the sting of hurt and disappointment. You know that you have disappointed others too. It is clear to you that no relationship ever delivers what dreamt it could. Your fantasy collides with reality, and reality bites!” (7)
 - We all have a picture of what we hope for in a relationship (think: Expectations) and it rarely, if ever, lives up to the hype that we truly desire.
 - What are some ways that we can temper our expectations and make sure they are realistic?
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- “God has put people in your life and placed you in theirs. When you look back, you can see their imprint on your character.”
 - There is a familiar proverb, “Tell me who your friends are, and I’ll tell you who you are.”
 - Thinking back to some of the biblical Proverbs that we talked about earlier, what are some of the ways that friends have influenced you both for good and for bad?
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- “Some of our deepest joys and most painful hurts have been in relationships. There are times we wish we could live alone and other times we are glad we don’t. What is certain is that we all have been shaped significantly by relationships that are full of both sorrow and joy.” (8)
- He then says, “Take a moment to reflect on the relationships in your life.” (8)

- What are some of the relationships that you have in your life? What are the different layers (those who are closer, those who you see less frequently, etc.) of relationships that you currently have? How have they changed over the past several years?
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An area that is rarely discussed by highly influential.

- This is short but has its own section because of its importance.
- Starting at the bottom of page 8, he asks a series of questions that probe into our past to show how we got to where we are today.
- This is **not** an exercise in finding blame and passing our own sin off to someone else in the past.
- What he is talking about is finding and knowing your individual inputs.
- He says, “Our family of origin is just one of many influences on our view of relationships. You have not become who you are all by yourself, which is why relationships are so important. They are inescapable and powerfully influential. The difficulty is that sin and grace coexist in all of them. Sin gets in the way of what grace can do, while grace covers what sin causes. Our relationships vividly display this dynamic of mixture of gold and dross.” (9)
- I believe that many of the problems that we face today in relationships is because we do not take the time to realize that we have been brought up in a different way than those around us.
- **Example:**
 - For me, I was brought up with the belief that debt is pretty much the worse thing that you could get yourself into. It was not from a biblical perspective.
 - My worldview put debt in a place of shame and serious bondage.
 - Think about how that works with someone on the leadership team at church who carries \$50-\$60,000 in debt and sees nothing wrong with doing so.
 - He was brought up to believe that you grow your credit by carrying 5-10% of your yearly income as debt so that you can show your activeness and get a higher credit score.
 - When the idea of getting a loan to buy a church comes up...we will be coming from two different perspectives...to different fundamental points of view.
 - If each of us is not **firstly** aware that we have been influenced by inputs from our youth, then we are going to automatically think that everyone thinks the same as us.

- **Secondly**, if we think that someone who does not hold to our point of view is automatically wrong, without any dialogue, then there is going to be much arguing and blaming.
- It would be very, very beneficial to sort out what you do that is influenced (not caused...we make our own decisions and are culpable for them) by our past.
 - This does not mean we spend years thinking about the past, but it does mean that we have to realize that life is not lived in a vacuum.
 - To repeat Tripp again, you are who you are because of the relationships that you have been around and have had input into your lives.
- You may have past hurts or successes that have influenced how you view relationships today.
- Those experiences may be part of the reason that you respond to certain situations...because you have trained yourself to do so.
- All of this to say...don't live life on autopilot. Before responding, take a moment and make sure that you have all the information needed *and* you understand why the other person is responding the way they are to the particular situation.
- **From the above example**, when a group can better understand one another and how they think, it is far easier to make decisions on issues that are not clean-cut black-and-white decisions.
 - If I know that I am averse to debt but that someone else is okay with some, I come to that meeting not trying to get my way but trying to understand that person.
 - Remember, relationships are also about what God is doing in your heart...not just the other person.
- As Tripp says, "The fatal flaw of human wisdom is that it promises that you can change your relationship without needing to change *yourself*." (9)
- This will *always* be the demise of any relationship; if you think that only the other person needs to change so that you *both* will be happy.

The Grace From Painful Relationships

- While never pleasurable in the moment, relationships that are sour are there to show us the need for grace from Jesus and our need for a perfect relationship that is only found in Him. (paraphrased from 10)
- If our relationship with God is not solid and in a good place, our relationship with others is going to be on shaky ground at best.
- He quotes C.S. Lewis, "When first things are put first, second things are not suppressed but increased." (10)
- He is talking about being pleased with lesser things...the gifts of God...instead of striving for the greater thing which is a relationship with God Himself.
- When we are only seeking the gift, we will tend to give up on pushing to get to the giver.

- He lists several indicators on pages 10-11 that may reveal to us that we are putting the wrong things first in our life.
- Take a moment and put these fruit issues into their root issue categories:
 - Write in your book or on this paper which category each evidenced fruit would fall into:
 - Fear of Man _____
 - Pride _____
 - Trusting Man and Not God _____
 - Comfort _____
 - Wrong Expectation _____
 - Sovereignty of self _____
 - Others? _____
- What steps can be taken to ensure that you are seeking to please God in those moments when you desire to please and serve your idol?
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____

A Biblical Lens on Relationships (11-16)

- This final section of the book, I believe, is the best part of these two chapters. He talks about “eight biblical facts that summarize the way God wants us to think about our relationships. These facts will shape the way we approach everything in this book.”

You Were Made For Relationships (11-12)

- We talked about this in the introduction, but you and I were made by God to be in relationships with other people. This is vital in our personal life and also in our life in the church.
- We are made in God’s image and part of that is we are to have community and relationships.
- He talks about the word *helper*. This is used to describe someone who is a companion, not just someone who labors alongside you in the daily grind of the job.
- He says, “The reason we know this is true is because the word *helper* is often used to describe God’s relationship with his people.” (12)
- As God’s unique creation, humans, we need the ultimate companionship with God our Creator. But, we also need to have companionship with other humans. That is how God designed it.

In some way, all relationships are difficult (12)

- All relationships are less than perfect and each one is going to take work...not just to survive but to thrive and be all that the Lord has designed them to be.
- I like how he said, “Quickly on the euphoric heels of Genesis 2 comes Genesis 3, where the entrance of sin brings frustration and confusion into relationships. In Genesis 3, man and woman engage in accusations and slander. Genesis 4 gets even worse, with a man murdering his own brother.” (12)
- Our relationships are marred by sin...both ours *and* the other persons.
- If you want any relationship to work; you must admit you are a sinner. You must be ready to repent, forgive, and work through issues that come up.¹⁵

Each of us is tempted to make relationships the end rather than the means. (13)

- Our personal relationship with God is always going to be the bedrock or foundation for our relationships with other people.
- As Tripp says, “All of creation was to function as an arrow pointing to God. But in our sin we tend to treat people and creation as more important. The very things God created to reveal his glory become instead the glory we desire.”
 - Can I say...**ouch!**
- Our desires (as Lewis has said) are for lesser things...or they are too weak.
- We are settling for satisfaction in our human relationships and not looking to God.
- **Example:**
 - In a marriage, if the husband seeks to please his wife (or vice versa) not only are the standards ever changing, but the pleasure is also only temporary. It only lasts for the duration of the event.
 - But, when both spouses seek to please God...seek to put Him first and their relationship with Him is the priority, both are joyful beyond measure and fully satisfied with one another.
- Your marriage (or any relationship) is not the goal but the conduit to something that much greater.

There are no secrets that guarantee problem-free relationships (13)

- If all we do is try to change our behavior so that someone will like us, we have done nothing for our own hearts or for the other person.
- We have fallen prey to a fear of man and seeking to please that idol by people pleasing.

¹⁵ There are times when one party seeks to do this, and the other does not. One party may want to blame shift, make excuse, or other things that simply are not helpful. While reconciliation should always be the goal, sometimes it is not possible. That will be addressed later in our study. For now, working on your own heart before God and others is the overall focus of the section.

- God wants your heart and knows that behavior will follow the inward change.
- Tripp says, “Skills and techniques appeal to us because they promise that relational problems can be fixed by tweaking our behavior without altering the bent of our hearts.” (13)
 - We like the *do this to fix that and then be happy* approach. We all know that this approach really does nothing but prolong the outcome of utter disaster.
- We need Christ because He “can dig deep enough to address the core motivations and desires of our hearts.” (13)
- **Example:**
 - You are struggling to communicate with someone. You have kids that are not talking “nicely” to each other. You need to have a hard conversation with someone.
 - These verses offer someone the correct way to speak to someone. If we just tell someone, here are 4 aspects to having a successful conversation:
 - Be honest with one another...don’t use *always* or *never* (v. 25)
 - Make sure to keep current...not bringing up the past (vv. 26-27)
 - Don’t take shots at each other...stick to attacking the problem (v. 29)
 - Act from a place of thoughtfulness...don’t just react to what was said (vv. 31-32)
 - **Ephesians 4:25-32** “Therefore, laying aside falsehood, SPEAK TRUTH EACH ONE of you WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another. BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity. He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need. Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”
- This would work for anyone who *just wants to get through the hard or unpleasant interaction*.
- We can train someone to do this, to act this way so that our life is easier. But then we would be serving an idol of comfort, fear of man, or any other thing that is not Christ.
- This is why we don’t start in **verse 25**, but looking back to **verse 20** “**But you did not learn Christ in this way.**” And then **verse 22** “**...you lay aside the old self...**” then **verse 23** “**and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind.**” Then **verse 24** “**and put on the new self...**”
- That is why **verse 25** starts with *Therefore*.

- In other words, since you know Christ, since you are striving to put off the old man, since you are being renewed in your mind and putting on the new man...now you can act in a way that is in accordance with Christ...the One whom you call Savior.

At some point you will wonder whether relationships are worth it (13-14)

- No matter who you are or who you have relationships with, you are going to become discouraged with the other person.
 - Remember, that other person is also going to become discouraged with you at some point.
- One point that Tripp makes throughout this book, and many of his other books is that we are sinners who are living with other sinners.
- We must, at our core, identify “the sin patterns that tend to trouble” our relationships (14)
- He says, “Because human conflict is the result of the spiritual battles in our hearts, wise relationships always seek to be aware of that deeper struggle.” (14)
- In other words, you are not battling the other person...it is a spiritual battle for what is going to have control over your own heart.
- It is not a matter of if, but when, when this comes upon you, are you ready to battle? Not with the person but the spiritual attack upon you.

God keeps us in messy relationships for his redemptive purpose (14-15)

- We always like to avoid relationships that are messy or that really don’t benefit us.
- Tripp says, “In reality, a difficult relationship is a mark of his love and care. We would prefer that God would just change the relationship, but he won’t be content until the relationship changes us too.” (14)
- God will keep us in the fire until we learn what we need to learn.¹⁶
- He also says, “What happens in the messiness of relationship is that our hearts are revealed, our weaknesses are exposed, and we start coming to the end of ourselves.” (14)
- This is where relationships really start to form...when someone else sees our *ugly* side and we see that we are truly weak and really need someone else.
- This does not mean that we look for someone to be our “rock” but rather, as Tripp says, this is when we can find our “hope in Christ’s grace” and this is actually a mark of a “mature relationship.”
- He then profoundly says, “The most dangerous aspect of your relationships is not your weakness, but your delusions of strength. Self-reliance is almost always a component of a bad relationship.” (14)

¹⁶ Once again, this is predicated upon both parties wanting to really work through what is happening. In the case of abuse, manipulation, lying, or any other sinful pretense, it may be best to simply forgo the relationship to honor God.

- We need Jesus and we need one another. If at any time we start to sense that we are going at it alone, living a life that is dependent upon only ourselves, it is a warning sign for us to run back to Christ.

The fact that our relationships work as well as they do is a sure sign of grace (15)

- Two sinners, two people whose natural default setting is to think of themselves come together and find companionship with one another.
- As Tripp says, “Considering our sin, it is amazing that people get along at all!” (15)
- It really is a testament to God’s grace that people can have any relationship with one another at all.
- Instead of looking at all the ways we are different, look to Christ and seek to please Him.

Scripture offers a clear hope for our relationships (15-16)

- Jesus is the ultimate picture of the hope that awaits all who put their trust in Him.
- I believe this is why without Christ, a real relationship with one another is just not possible.
- A relationship built upon, or around common interests and desires is not really a relationship.
- But one that is built upon the finished work of Christ has depth, has forgiveness, has a real desire to see the other person grow in grace...even if it means you feel pain.
- As Tripp says, “In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus brought reconciliation in fundamental ways. Jesus reconciled us to God, which then becomes the foundation for the way he reconciles us to one another.” (16)
- It is only through the finished work of Christ that we can experience a true and fulfilling relationship, firstly with God and secondly with one another.