

August Fitness Challenge: Relational Fitness

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1 Corinthians 13; 1 John 4: 7-12

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Introduction

Phillip McGraw earned a Ph.D. in psychology and worked years as a counselor before co-founding *Courtroom Scientists, Inc.* (1989). In 1996, Oprah Winfrey hired the firm for assistance in a court case. After the trial, Ms. Winfrey invited Dr. McGraw to appear on her talk show. His popularity led to a weekly segment where he counseled couples as a *Relationship and Life Strategy Expert*.

Dr. Phil quickly became a household name. In 2002, McGraw began hosting a daily show of his own. The format features Dr. Phil offering advice for his troubled guests. If nothing else, the show makes viewers feel better about their own problems! Previous programs have included:

- A 700 pound woman who demands constant help from family and friends.
- A stay-at-home mother of five seeking help for anger management.
- A man reunited with his mother who abandoned him 22 years ago.
- And women who marry con men.

Dr. Phil illustrates what we already know: human relations are messed up! All relationships are dysfunctional—they just occupy various places on the spectrum. The potential promise of intimacy is seldom realized. Instead, we sabotage our relations with family, friends, and others.

I. Restored Relationship

In the beginning, God created humans as individuals in need of community. The creation account in Genesis describes how the Lord God formed a man and placed him in the Garden of Eden; but he was lonely. So God paraded all the animals before **Adam** to name. Afterwards, however, the man was still lonely. He needed someone to be a companion to work and play beside him.

So the Lord formed **Eve** to be his helpmate. When Adam awoke and saw her face, he said, “You done GOOD, God.” That’s a literal translation from the Hebrew! Adam knew this was the one he had missed without even knowing it.

Like Adam, we are born as individuals in search of relationship. We come into the world as unique individuals. We spend a lifetime building bridges to others in our world. However, these relationships are not always fulfilled and fulfilling.

The Lord created humanity to enjoy full fellowship with God and others. However, Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and **SIN** entered the world. Human sinfulness continues to separate us from God and others.

The Bible says that the real problem with human relationships is . . . humans! To quote the cartoon character, Pogo: *“We has met the enemy, and they is US!”* Even our best efforts still result in barren, broken relations.

Despite our disobedience, the Creator continues to love us. The Bible is the story of a covenant-making God who never abandons his children. *“The Lord loved the world so much that he sent his only Son.” “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* All who accept God’s grace by faith receive the gift of salvation. Our sinfulness is forgiven, and we enter into eternal life. Our relationship with God is restored.

II. Linked Relationships

Then the Holy Spirit works on our human relations. Here is a fundamental, spiritual principle: **Our relationship with God is reflected and affected by our relationships with others.** Love of God and love of neighbor are inseparably linked.

Jesus said that the **Greatest Commandment** is to *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.”* Then he immediately added: *“The second is like unto the first: Love your neighbor as yourself.”* The second is like the first. To do one is to do the other. To neglect one is to neglect the other.

In John 13: 34-35, Jesus told the disciples: *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.”* The chief mark of Christian discipleship is our love for others.

We empathize with the man who said: *“I love humanity—it’s my neighbor that I cannot stand!”* But if we want to love God then we do so by loving others. When we love others, we show our love for God. When we don’t love others, then we don’t love God.

1 John 4: 7-8; 12: *“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love . . . No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”*

III. Barriers and Walls

Unfortunately, becoming a Christian does not automatically conclude: *“And they lived happily ever after.”* Sin builds many barriers between people that must be slowly torn down. Creating Godly relationships is a lifelong labor requiring both divine grace and human effort.

Today I invite you to prayerfully consider the different relationships in your life, including: spouse, children, parents, siblings, friends, neighbors, church, school, work, and community. Do these relations reflect our love for God? Is something missing? What barriers exist? What walls have been erected? Are you willing to settle for something less than the best in these situations? And are you willing to let God transform you?

Face it—our relationships tend to be **shallow and superficial**. We have the same dialogue with store clerks and strangers that we have with the persons closest to us: *“How are you?” “I’m fine, how are you.” “I’m fine.”* Throw in a few comments about the weather and the Atlanta Braves, and I’ve just summed up 90% of our conversations.

Several years ago I gave a devotional to a meeting of ministers and ministerial candidates. It was a diverse group of people united only by a shared call to the ordained ministry. Yet I went on to reflect on how we seldom shared the stories of our calls with one another. I have good friends in the ministry that I have known for years, and we have never taken the time to talk about this most holy experience in our lives.

The same is true in our Christian relationships within the church. Look around you—there is no common, human principle that binds us together. We are a different people—some more different than others! The one thing that unites us is our faith. However, we seldom share this with one another.

IV. Practical Steps

Our goal is to have Christ-like relationships that go beyond the superficial and dive into the depths of our shared lives. God does not want us to settle for anything less. However, most of our relationships do not reach their potential. How do we practice **relational fitness** in our lives? Here are some practical strategies to “baptize” our relations so that they can fulfill their God-given promise.

1) **Imagination and Will**

First, use divine imagination to envision what a relationship could and should be. Spouse. Child. Parent. Friend. Church member. Neighbor. Allow the Holy Spirit to grant you a vision of a future different from today. Don’t settle for “as is.” Instead, dare to imagine what “should be.”

Thoughts lead to action. The thought is the mother of the deed. However, we can also ACT our way into different attitudes towards others. Christian love is a tough love that is more about willing than feeling.

Jesus said: *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”* When a Pharisee attempted to define who “neighbor” is, Jesus told “the **Parable of the Good Samaritan.**” However, the story does not define who a neighbor IS and IS NOT. Instead, it reveals how neighbors ACT.

If we are depending upon feelings alone to define our acts and attitudes of love towards others, then we will quickly fail. Christian love is based upon a spiritual willingness to love others even when they are unlovable.

2) **Responsibility and Initiative**

Take responsibility for your part in the weaknesses of a relationship. Do you know the one common denominator in all of your dysfunctional relationships? It’s YOU!

This runs counter to a culture of victimization that likes to say, “It’s not my fault.” We blame everything and everyone except ourselves for barren and broken relationships. In any unfulfilled relationship, there is always enough blame to go around.

Then it is our responsibility to take the initiative to transform these relations into what God intended them to be. We cannot control what the other person does or how s/he will react. But we are charged with doing our part to mending broken relationships and strengthening existing ones.

3) **Prayer**

Pray for the other person. In one radical statement, Jesus said we are even supposed to pray for our enemies and bless those who curse us. A good starting point is to pray for those who love us and bless those who bless us. Then move on to the more advanced forms of prayer.

Sometimes prayer will change the other person. Regardless of the outcome, the very act of praying changes the person who prays.

4) **Communication**

Another key to right relationship is communication. This is so obvious that it is almost trite; yet it is a critical element that we often ignore. The root of communication is “communion.” From communion and communication we receive community.

Speaking and listening. Creating time to do both. Most relationships break down due to a lack of communication.

The sacrament of **Holy Communion** is also an apt model for community with others. When we kneel at the altar and receive the elements, we join in communion with God and those kneeling with us. When we come closer to God, we come closer to one another. When we come closer to one another, we come closer to God.

5) **Small Groups**

The sermon today has primarily focused upon one-on-one relationships. However, we all need more than one friend.

Pepper Rodgers humorously recalls an incident that occurred in the midst of a terrible season as the football coach at UCLA. He said that it even began to affect his home life. He recalls, "It seemed like my dog was my only friend. I told my wife that a man needs at least two friends; so, she bought me another dog!"

Each Christian is a part of a larger community of faith. Relational fitness also occurs in small group settings. It is critical for disciples to find a smaller setting where they can know and be known, love and be loved.

John Wesley recognized this in the beginning moments of the Methodist movement. He created Covenant Groups of about a dozen people who met weekly to hold one another accountable. Wesley’s genius for organization created a system that enabled his revival movement to continue till today.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12: *“Two are better than one because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up . . . Thought one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”*

We offer a wide variety of small group opportunities, including: Sunday School classes, Bible studies, women’s groups, men’s groups, youth groups, choirs, mission groups, and many more.

This week we begin our fall opportunities for Bible studies. There are a number of choices for you to become involved in a study group that is not only informational but also transformational.

6) Freezing

I do think it is important to recognize that any right relationship requires two people. We can do our part, but we cannot control how the other person will act and react. There are occasions we may find ourselves in harmful and hurtful relationships. What is the Christian's responsibility then?

I once took a course on conflict management. (Note it was conflict management and NOT resolution—sometimes the best you can hope for is to manage a situation.) The professor made this insightful statement: *“There are situations where people act harmfully and destructively. Sometimes the most creative thing you can do is ‘freeze’ the situation so that the person can do no further harm.”*

Jesus said to turn the other cheek, but he didn't say to become punching bags. Sometimes the most creative thing we can do is “freeze” a relationship so the person cannot harm us and others any further. Even then, we can continue to pray for them.

Conclusion

Dr. Phil practices **behavior modification therapy** that seeks to change unwanted behavior without attempting to discover the root cause. While this approach can treat the symptoms, it does not cure the underlying disease.

Our sinfulness separates us from right relationship with God and others; but God has taken the initiative and broken down the barriers at the cross and empty tomb. All those who accept Jesus Christ as Savior can enter into a right relationship with God.

THEN the Holy Spirit begins work on our earthly relationships. Listen again to our Scripture lesson from 1 Corinthians 13:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always preserves. Love never fails. And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

THIS is the type of relationship that the Holy Spirit seeks to establish in our Christian lives. Aren't you tired of second rate, shallow relations with others that do not satisfy? Our August Fitness Challenge calls us to envision a future different from today. Relational fitness can sanctify our relationships and dedicate them to God.