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SESSION ONE

This Is a Friendship

Reading adapted from a message by Bill Hybels

There is a great story that dates back to the early 1960s when Vince Lombardi took over the reins of the Green Bay Packers. Most likely you've heard it before. It's become legendary. The Packer franchise had been losing for almost ten straight years. They were at the bottom of the standings, and morale was sagging.

Enter Vince Lombardi as the new coach. He is charged with the challenge of turning this franchise around, and he's all pumped up about it. He began leading practices, inspiring, training, motivating. But at one point in a practice, he just got so frustrated with what was going on with the players that he blew the whistle.

"Everybody stop and gather around," he said. Then he knelt down, picked up the pignskin, and said, "Let's start at the beginning. This is a football. These are the yard markers. I'm the coach. You are the players." He went on, in the most elementary of ways, to explain the basics of football.

Every once in a while, we all need a breathtakingly basic talk about something—a "this is a football" talk or, in this case, a "this is a friendship" talk.

The Right Idea

The Bible says that friendship—community—is one of the richest experiences you can have in life. It makes your heart bigger. It helps keep you steady in a storm. It ends your aloneness. It is key to personal transformation.

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God wired us up to know and be known, to love and be loved, to serve and be served, to celebrate and be celebrated. If community is so wonderful, how, in painstakingly basic terms, do you move from where you are now into deep relating patterns that would fit the definition of this thing called community?

You have to start by making sure that you have the right idea about the nature of friendship. Do you want to wreck the possibility of a relationship? Then go into it with the idea that there's someone out there just sitting on a park bench waiting to nurture you, affirm you, comfort you, envelop you with round-the-clock care—and all you have to do is show up with 150 pounds of need. If that's the expectation you are bringing into friendship, you'll probably find potential friends making themselves curiously scarce.

The right idea of friendship involves the *mutual* exchange of knowledge, kindness, service, and celebration. It is a growing commitment among peers to seek the well-being of each other. That very radical concept is the central message of Philippians 2:1–11. The core of biblical friendship is seeking the interest of the person you have befriended. It is the joyful sublimation of your own agenda once in a while for the sheer pleasure of meeting a need or bringing a smile to the face of a friend. It is the consistent resistance of the urge to be independent and self-preoccupied.

Is it self-examination time? How much do you bring to the relationships you're building? How much do you expect to receive? What is your self-preoccupation factor? If you are even five or ten percent off from a balanced view of friendship, you'll probably find your relationships aren't working all that well.

The “Want To” Factor

The next step in moving from aloneness to community is to face a sobering reality about the friendship-building process. Selecting and building friendships is an inexact

and often lengthy, frustrating endeavor. It requires energy, risk, and, quite possibly, hurt. That is the plain truth.

When the Bible says that certain friends bring words that are comparable to silver and gold, it is certainly underscoring that friends are valuable. They have worth. But in addition to this, the friendship-development process itself might be compared to panning for silver and gold. You've got to work at it. Sometimes when you are mining for silver or gold, you think you have found it and you get all excited about it only to find out it's "fool's gold." Then you're let down and hurt.

There is a price to be paid up front for the eventual discovery of the mother lode—this thing called community. We would prefer a drive-up window. We would much rather pull up to the deep friendship window and say, "I want two, with change back from my dollar." Most of the time life doesn't work that way.

Community building is not easy. Very seldom can you just get plunked into a premade group and immediately experience community without some awkwardness, some trial and error. There has to be an internal "want to" factor that is strong enough to be able to push you through the false starts and stops that are going to happen as you build community.

Moving toward Authenticity

The next challenge you'll face in your quest for community is to move beyond the level of superficiality. When you start developing a relationship, you generally start out with conversations that are a bit shallow. And that is as it should be. Trust has to be built. The basic knowledge-base concerning one another must develop. But if you stay stuck at the superficial level—where all you're talking about is the weather, the stock market, and what movie you rented last weekend—you will probably start to say, "I was created for more than this."

Most of us get tired of surface relationships and wish we could move on. But how? The single best tool I have

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discovered to move relationships beyond the level of yawning superficiality is the asking of a carefully thought-out question and the urging of an honest, sincere answer.

What question do we ask almost everybody whenever we see them? "How are you doing?" The standard answers usually are, "Fine," "Good," or "Not bad."

What if you asked the question this way, "How are you doing, *really*?" "How are you doing, really—because I have a few moments and would love to listen to whatever it is that you'd like to talk about. How are things at work, really? How are things at home, really?"

I've asked that question and have sensed people say inside, "I think he means it." And they get tender. They want to open up. They just need to be given permission. That question has prompted hundreds of soulful conversations.

There is another question that I'm beginning to use—it's the simple question, "How did you feel about that?" For example, you are waiting impatiently to start your golf game. Your friend is late. When he shows up you say, "Where were you?"

"I got stuck at work. Actually, my boss just raged all over me."

What is the normal response? "Sorry. Rage happens. Let's go—we'll miss our tee-off time." But what would happen if your follow-up question was, "Well, how did you feel about that?"

Another question I use a lot, especially with my kids, is, "What are you thinking right now?" It's more than a request for information. It is a statement of love. It's a way of saying, "Whatever is important to you right now—whatever is on your mind—is important to me. I want to know it."

These questions need to be asked at appropriate times in discerning ways. If people are reluctant to answer, you probably shouldn't press. But you've sent a clear message that you care, that you'll listen. They are the kinds of questions that prepare the soil for progressively deep kinds of sharing.

The Key to Relational Freedom

Finally, your ability to experience and enjoy the fullness of human community is directly linked to the quality of your community with God.

Do you know the truth we never confess to? We all walk around wishing someone was thinking about us all the time—wishing that someone would move toward us with love all the time, be there for us all the time. We wish we were the center of someone's world. We put pressure on friendships that they weren't meant to bear. We raise the expectations higher and higher and people begin staying away.

Enter God. God says, "I have love of another kind. I have a lavish, uncontaminated, focused affection for you. I am thinking about you all the time. I am moving toward you with love all the time. I will be there for you all the time." When you open your heart up to the love of God through Christ, that love becomes the bedrock foundation out of which you move in your human relationships.

If your relationship with God is maturing, it gives you the inner security to take risks in human relationships. If a risk doesn't work out, you have not lost everything. You are not going to die. You have God's friendship in your life. From that rich point of security and peace you can move more freely in your relational world. You will grow into a more consistently loving person. You will develop deep community because you won't need it in the ultimate sense. You won't press for it in unhealthy ways or make demands that it can't deliver. You'll be positioned to experience it as a gift.

"This is a football." "This is a friendship." Let's be clear about it, move toward it, persevere in it. Let's offer good gifts of community to one another.

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SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

In Scripture we're told that Abraham, the great hero of faith, was given an amazing title. God called him "my friend" (Isa. 41:8). Even more amazing, Jesus told his followers that he no longer called them his servants but rather his friends (John 15:15). His enemies gave Jesus the title "friend of . . . 'sinners'" (Matt. 11:19), intending it as an insult. Instead, he wore it as a badge of honor.

Jesus not only wants to be your Savior, Teacher, and Lord, he longs to be your friend. Devote this week to cultivating a deeper friendship with Jesus. Consciously seek his companionship. Enjoy his presence. Share your life, thoughts, and activities with him as true friends do together. Here are some ideas:

- When you wake up, remember that Jesus is present with you as a friend. You are already on his mind. Invite him to spend the day with you.
- Throughout the day, whenever you are tempted, anxious, or discouraged, take that emotion as a cue to remind you that you are not alone. Take a moment to talk to Jesus about your concern, as one friend would speak to another.
- At some point during the day, take time out to do something you love to do. It may be taking a walk, listening to music, riding a motorcycle, or pursuing a hobby. Invite Jesus to be a part of this activity. Don't strain yourself to pray or to make the time be "spiritual." Simply be aware that he is with you as your friend. Speak to him as it feels natural to do so.
- When something good happens—even if it seems small or insignificant—express your gratitude or joy to Jesus. Take a moment to reflect that he shares your joy with you, as any good friend does.
- When someone else's need interrupts your day, seize it as an opportunity to serve Jesus as you would do a favor for a good friend.

Keep track of how this exercise goes. How hard is it for you to relate to Jesus as a trusted friend? What difference does it make in your life as you stretch yourself to experience him in that way?

BIBLE STUDY

We can learn much about authentic Christian community from the apostle Paul. Both his life experiences and his explicit instructions about relationships have given believers a wonderful picture of how the body of Christ is supposed to operate—how important relationships are, how to strengthen them, and how to work through inevitable difficulties.

But Paul was not always a passionate builder of community. The first mention of Paul (then named Saul) is in Acts 7. The scene is the trial of Stephen, who was falsely arrested for allegedly teaching against Moses and God. At the end of the trial, Stephen is martyred by stoning. Read the account in Acts 7:54–8:3.

1. What was Saul's attitude about the death of Stephen?

What additional actions did Saul take against Christians?

2. What insight does Paul's own description of his preconversion condition give you concerning what he was like and what was important to him at that time? (See Phil. 3:4–6; Gal.1:13–14; Acts 22:1–5)

NOTE: Paul describes himself as zealous for God. “Zeal” is a significant term to help us understand the preconversion Paul. In his book *What Paul Really Said*, scholar N. T. Wright observes, “Whereas for the modern Christian ‘zeal’ is something you do on your knees, or in evangelism, or in works of charity, for the first-century Jew ‘zeal’ was something you did with a knife. Those first-century Jews who longed for revolution against Rome . . . saw themselves . . . as having the right, and the duty, to put that zeal into operation with the use of violence. ‘Zeal’ thus comes close to holy war. . . .”

3. Acts 9 describes Paul’s dramatic conversion. Through that singular encounter with Christ, Paul’s passions were forever redirected, his priorities forever changed. From the following passages (all excerpts from letters Paul wrote to various young churches), how is that redirection seen, particularly when it comes to relationships and community?

Philippians 4:1

Colossians 2:1–5

1 Thessalonians 2:7–8, 11–12, 17–20

Acts 20:36–38 (Paul’s farewell to the elders of the church at Ephesus)