

There's an experience unique (as far as I can tell) to American culture. A awkward, groan-inducing experience I'm sure most all of us have participated in at one time or another.

I'm referring, of course, to the Icebreaker.

You know: Introduce yourself. Tell us your name, where you're from and what city in the world best embodies your personality.

Uh... okay. I'm JR. I'm from Missouri and I would say... Gotham City, I guess.

I once had to do an icebreaker where we had to go around and say what Cereal Mascot we were. There were like 30 people in the group, and I was last, so not only were Tony the Tiger and the Trix Rabbit gone, so were the more obscure ones like Smax the Frog. The only one left was the Cream of Wheat guy, so even though I don't consider myself an old black man who may or may not be helping to white-wash portrayals of slavery in the American South, I chose him.

Awkward, right?

(Now, I have a confession: I am a super-extrovert, so I *love* icebreakers. But I am in the extreme minority). Why do we find Icebreakers so awkward? It's inherent in the design: the "ice" the games break is the lack of intimacy automatic among strangers. Meeting someone for the first time is an inherently awkward experience, so the icebreakers try to smash through that. The hope is that on the other side of those few awkward moments, everyone will feel more comfortable opening up a little.

These games point to a strange feature of our culture: the reality that wholesome, life-giving friendships are rare, or at least rarer than they should be. The reality is that most people in our culture either have no friendships or have what are often called toxic or unsafe friendships.

And this lack of healthy friendships is dangerous for us. This lack keeps us from the life that God has called us to live. We're in a series right now called The Mentorist. We're taking seriously the call we find in the Scriptures to engage in life-giving relationships in three orientations: Before, Beside and Behind. Last week, we looked at what it means to have relationships with people who've gone Before us, those who are ahead of us in life, who can pass on their wisdom and experience.

Today, we look Beside us, to those in a similar life-stage to us. When we talk today about Beside relationships, we're examining these wholesome, healthy, life-giving friendships. Beside relationships are increasingly rare in our culture. And that's bad news for us.

Some of us are aware of that. We've had those relationships at some point in our lives, but we've moved or they've moved or maybe there was an irreconcilable fallout or something, and now we don't have those Beside friendships anymore.

But some of us have never had a true friendship. We've never been in a healthy, wholesome, mutually sacrificial friendship. So we don't even know what we're missing. We don't know the freedom that comes with walking Beside someone else, sharing pain, struggle, victory and joy with people who love us as though they're family.

The Scriptures are filled with examples of these sorts of Beside relationships. We looked at Paul last week. We usually think of Paul as a sort of Super-Christian who never had help, but a close reading of his letters reveals he had a *huge* team of people working with him, even helping to write his letters.

And Jesus himself had concentric circles of relationships that look familiar to us today. [image, with various levels highlighted as we move forward] We know he taught huge crowds - people he obviously wasn't intimate with. But he also had a group scholars call the 70 - a more specific group of followers he sent out in twos to teach and preach. Then of course he had his famous 12 disciples - a group that went everywhere with him, helped him and received his most intimate teachings. And then of the 12, he had three - Peter, James and John - who were extremely close to him - the three he depended on when he was hurting.

That model isn't so different from what we do today. We all have an outer ring of people we don't really know or sort of recognize. A layer of acquaintances - people whose names we know and maybe spend some time with, but we're certainly not close. Then at least most of us have that next ring of people we'd truly consider friends. For most of us, the breakdown is at this final ring. Many of us don't have very close relationships, friendships that we would call intimate. Or if we do, the friends we let in to this innermost circle are toxic or unsafe.

So today I want to look at this inner ring, where these Beside friendships really thrive. And specifically at one famous Beside friendship in the Bible: David and Jonathan. We'll be in 1 Samuel 20 today - turn there in your Bibles with me. [let's put up a title screen: 1 Samuel 20:10-20; 41-42 page XXX. Keep this up until it's time to read the actual scripture] If you grabbed one of our Bibles off the rack on the way in, or out of the pew in front of you, you can find 1 Samuel 20 on page XXX. And if you don't own a Bible, we'd be thrilled for you to take that one with you as a gift from us.

As you're turning to 1 Samuel 20, a little background: We're about to meet David and Jonathan. Jonathan's father is Saul, the first king of Israel. Saul has been repeatedly unfaithful to God, breaking the covenant God made with him, so as a result, God has told Saul that his dynasty will not continue to rule Israel after his death.

Saul is understandably furious. David - a young man who's an accomplished warrior and well-loved by the people - has been anointed as the new king. At this point in the story, Saul is actively trying to kill David (though in secret, because David's so popular). It's gotten bad enough that David has gone into hiding. And if that wasn't complicated enough, Saul's son and heir Jonathan is David's best friend.

In 1 Samuel 20, David has already evaded a couple of Saul's attempts on his life, but Jonathan is thus far unaware. In this passage, Jonathan learns what's going on. He and David devise a plan for Jonathan to feel out his father's plans, and let David know. Let's take a look, and note how he reacts:

David asked, "How will I know whether or not your father is angry?"

"Come out to the field with me," Jonathan replied. And they went out there together. Then Jonathan told David, "I promise by the Lord, the God of Israel, that by this time tomorrow, or the next day at the latest, I will talk to my father and let you know at once how he feels about you. If he speaks favorably about you, I will let you know. But if he is angry and wants you killed, may the Lord strike me and even kill me if I don't warn you so you can escape and live. May the Lord be with you as he used to be with my father. And may you treat me with the faithful love of the Lord as long as I live. But if I die, treat my family with this faithful love, even when the Lord destroys all your enemies from the face of the earth."

So Jonathan made a solemn pact with David, saying, “May the Lord destroy all your enemies!” And Jonathan made David reaffirm his vow of friendship again, for Jonathan loved David as he loved himself. -- 1 Samuel 20:10-17

What's particularly fascinating to me is Jonathan's total commitment to David. Even though he's the heir to Saul's dynasty, he's not threatened by David's success, or God's choice of David. Instead, he celebrates David's success. And in the end, the text tells us that Jonathan loved David "as he loved himself". Other translations read "he loved him as he loved his own soul."

For Jonathan, David was in that inner circle [graphic back up]. He couldn't imagine feeling threatened by David any more than he could feel threatened by himself. He celebrated David's success the same way he would celebrate his own success. Jonathan loved David as more than a brother - he loved him as he loved himself.

This is a beautiful picture of an intimate Beside friendship. Two men who are wholly committed to each other's success and flourishing. We see that it's mutual later in the passage, when Jonathan comes back to report to David that Jerusalem has become unsafe for him. Take a look down in v41:

David came out from where he had been hiding near the stone pile. Then David bowed three times to Jonathan with his face to the ground. Both of them were in tears as they embraced each other and said good-bye, especially David. At last Jonathan said to David, “Go in peace, for we have sworn loyalty to each other in the Lord’s name. The Lord is the witness of a bond between us and our children forever.” Then David left, and Jonathan returned to the town. -- 1 Samuel 20:41-42

Now, especially if you don't have these kinds of relationships in your life, I can imagine that this picture of intimacy in a friendship makes you uncomfortable. If you don't have this in your life, the idea of being in that sort of relationship like *now* is awkward. It's that icebreaker phenomenon: trying to force intimacy where there isn't any is always weird.

[bring back the relationship rings] So where are you? If you only have casual acquaintances, you need to move into some close friendships [outer ring to second ring]. If you have close friendships but no intimate friendships, you need to make that move [second ring to inner ring].

The point is that these intimate Beside friendships don't happen overnight. Like any relationship, they take time. My best friend, my most intimate friend (not counting my wife Amanda - because we're not talking about spousal relationships here) is named Tom. I've known him for almost 10 years, and he knows me better than any of my friends. I've shared more of my life with him than anyone else.

But Tom and I didn't hit it off immediately. In fact, we began as leery acquaintances, circling each other on the fringes of each other's' outer rings. As we hung out a little in groups, we moved closer together, but it wasn't until we took a road trip together over a year after we'd first met that we really became friends. And it was another couple of years of hanging out, working together, celebrating each other's' mutual successes and mourning our failures together that he truly became an intimate friend to me.

I've never had a truly significant relationship in my life that didn't begin that same way. And you'll find that's the case in your life, too.

The problem is that we tend to stall out in one of the outer rings of friendship, to refuse to push any of those friendships toward a more life-giving intimacy.

The other problem may be that the people we let into our inner circles may be toxic or unsafe. Friendships can be toxic for a number of reasons. Maybe the person is selfish, so your friendship is one-sided. Maybe they're a constant source of negativity or judgment.

Whatever the reason, this relationship that you've allowed into your inner circles isn't life-giving. It leaves you feeling beaten up, exhausted or condemned.

This is challenging to do, but if you have a toxic relationship in your life, you need to move that relationship out of the center of your life. You don't have to drop that person as a friend, but you do need to draw some clear and healthy boundaries around how much of your time, your energy and your self you share with a person who is only hurting you.

Here are some characteristics of a life-giving Beside friendship, one that will enable you to flourish the way God created you to:

That person should be in the **Same Life Stage** as you. You should be able to commiserate together, celebrate together and help each other. And again, this person is *not* your spouse. If you're married, I hope your spouse is in that innermost circle of your relationships, but he or she should not be the only person there. And single people: you don't have to be married to have these intimate friendships. Jesus and Paul both had them and neither of them was married. Married or single, we should all be pursuing these Beside relationships.

A healthy Beside relationship is **Sacrificial**. Jesus himself said that the greatest love we can show someone else is laying down our lives for them. I call my Beside friends my 2 am friends because I know I could call them at 2 am and they'd be there for me, no questions asked. They sacrifice for me, and I for them.

Our Beside relationships should also be **Mutual**. This is where a lot of relationships get toxic: One person is being sacrificial and the other person is happy to receive all the sacrifices. If only one of you is ever sharing your life and the other is expected just to listen, that's a toxic relationship. If you're constantly giving of yourself and the other person only takes, that's a toxic relationship. Healthy relationships are always mutual, especially in the Beside phase.

It's worth noting that the other two relationships - Before and Behind - aren't nearly as mutual, at least not in the same way. Before and Behind are clearly one-sided because the person with more experience has more to give. That's the whole point of those relationships. But these intimate friendships should *always* be mutual.

Beside relationships should be **Energizing**. You shouldn't feel judged and condemned by your friends. That doesn't mean that you don't call each other on stuff and hold each other accountable, but your friend should be in your corner, cheering you on, not beating you up.

Similarly, Beside relationships should be **Positive**. Everyone's life is hard. And of course you can and should vent to your friends. But if your friendship is wholly characterized by complaining and negativity, you're not actually bringing life to each other.

Finally, our Beside friendships should be **Consistent**. We can't get by on interacting with these people a couple of times per year. That's not consistent enough to nourish us. There's no formula for how often you should be meeting with someone, but I'd be shocked if you could talk with someone less than once a month (at minimum) and maintain a truly life-giving relationship.

And that's ultimately what this whole thing is really all about: we want to have the life God created us for. The life that is truly life.

[bring back the rings] So the question is: what is the next right step for you? For many of us, that's going to mean moving a key friendship further into the circles. To choose to be a little bit vulnerable. To initiate more consistent opportunities to spend some time together. If you need a guide, you can use the Discussion Guides we create each week that are in our bulletins. It's got scripture you can read and discuss together. It's got questions you can kick around. This guide is designed to help you take the next right step in your relationships, to move them toward intimacy.

Some others of you may have toxic relationships too far inside your circles. You may need to draw some healthy boundaries. To spend less time with that person, or share less of yourself. You may have someone too close to you, someone who's poisoning you rather than making you better. Drawing those boundaries is tough to do, but vital. The more toxic persons you have at the center of your life, the fewer healthy persons can be there.

The end goal is to cultivate those Biblical Beside relationships, like the relationship we see between David and Jonathan. Between Jesus and his inner circle. Between Paul and his teammates.

The work that God calls us to is no less than restoring an entire world that's been scarred by sin. Broken and hurting. This is a huge, overwhelming task to contemplate on our own.

And the good news is that we were never created to tackle it alone. We were created and called alongside people who need us as much as we need them. People who *can* in fact help us become more like Jesus, who encourage and hold us accountable and mourn and rejoice with us. This is the heart of Jesus' good news: that through our first true friend, who gave up his very life for us, we can be reconnected to those who are walking Beside us on our journey. The good news is that we're not alone, that we can be true friends with God and with others.

### Friendship Examine

What friendships in my life are toxic?

What friendships in my life are life-giving?

What friendship in my life can I move toward a healthy intimacy?

What next right step can I take in that friendship this week?