
VISION FORWARD



THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIP

We focus much on our engagement or what we're called to do as a church. This is so important. We are not consumers and we are not owners. We are stewards. Collectively we are a steward of the gifts, time, talents, and energy God has given us to do his will. We are each called to follow Jesus, but we are first of all called to be his *body* (1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 4:1-16).

Each of us will one day give an account not only for what we do individually with what God has entrusted to us, but, I'm convinced, also for what we do to work together with other members of the body we are connected to, for what we do to contribute to their growth, and for what we do to maintain the unity of our local church body.

In other words, the reward I will receive from Jesus doesn't just hinge on my being an individual disciple, but on my being an individual *member* of his body, contributing to the whole and building others up. This, the power of our relationships, is intrinsically part of both the mission of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

By “power” I mean an internal dynamic or force at work in us and through us. Our relationships, therefore, are an internal dynamic and force at work in the church, either fortifying it or weakening it. The source of that power is, I believe, in the words of Jesus, “love”. “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35)

If you take away the cross, you rip the heart right out of God’s love

The measure or standard of our love for one another, though, is not our love for each other, but Jesus’ love for us (John 13:34). If the standard of our love for one another were the love we expected in return, every single one of us would always fall short. None of us are capable of bearing up under the weight of loving unconditionally. And, yet, we all want that kind of love.



It is only when I look and see the unconditional love that Jesus had for me—“that he loved me and gave himself for me,” (Galatians 2:20) that “he died for the ungodly... while we were still sinners” (Romans 5:6, 8)—that I see the poverty and weakness of my love compared to the riches and power of his. And in so doing, my love is enriched and empowered. More accurately, my heart is transformed and enlarged by the love of God.

When Jesus says that God so loved the world (John 3:16), he’s talking about a world that is marred and scarred by sin. As sinners we are hideous, as it were, in the sight of God, and yet God loved us still. No, it’s not that we were lovely, lovable, easy to love. It’s that we were unlovely, unlovable, haters and enemies of God. The measure of God’s love for us, then, wasn’t our love for him. Rather, the measure of God’s love for us is the measure of his love for his Son.

The love of the Father for the Son is without measure. No height or width or depth could contain it. No power or might or authority could conquer it. No created thing in heaven or on earth or below could express it. And yet God so loved the world, in that he gave his only Son. In the giving of Jesus for the world we see the most simple, clear, concise, full, and pure expression and demonstration of God’s love for us.

We must pause and say that the heart of the gospel is not that God is love, but that God gave his *son*. If you take away the cross, you rip the heart right out of God’s love. “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15).

God isn’t seeking to create new institutions. He is seeking to create new people with new hearts. So we can see that God’s love for us in Christ, at work in our hearts and in our relationships, is the driving force behind all that we are and do. But we must also see that if that love is weakened or abandoned, then things will begin to break down and go bad.

It seems to me that while it is hard work to maintain course and keep the vision before us, it can be quite easy in the process to lose sight of one another, of our relationships with each other. The goal for Elim Grace is never to thrive and accomplish much while relationally we starve on the inside. The devil knows that we are far less a true and effective biblical church if we are rich in our good works

but poor in our relationships. He would, I'm convinced, be content to leave us to do many good things, if he could sow division and offenses and choke out love from our midst.

Personally, I have frequently found that the devil is a master at raising or planting suspicion in my mind about others. How quickly and easily I entertain and follow that thought about what I suspect someone is thinking, saying, or feeling about me. Before I know it, I am angry and hurt, resentful and defensive, even though I have no evidence that they are in fact thinking, saying, feeling, or doing any of the things I'm convinced of.

God isn't seeking to create new institutions, but new people.

And, yet, it almost never fails that when that person appears or calls, even though I'm prepared for a confrontation and proof of what I am certain is the truth, their first words or actions prove me entirely wrong. I realize that the devil is a masterful liar and deceiver.

How many relationships has our enemy uprooted, torn apart, and ruined with empty accusations. We must be prepared to stand firm in love. In love praying for one another, believing the best of one another, trusting one another, speaking truth, silencing gossip, forgiving one another, laying down our offenses, being slow to speak and quick to listen, being patient and forbearing, having hard conversations, becoming vulnerable, being humble, repenting, confessing our sins one to another, asking for help, seeking advice, etc..

Jesus doesn't simply save individuals. He saves a people, their relationships. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." (1 Peter 2:9)



The power of our relationships is the evidence of God's dynamic grace at work in us and through us, training us and sending us to the world. The power of our relationships is the manifestation of the presence of the Spirit of God in our midst, producing in each of us all the fruit of the character of Christ. So let us strive together, for the sake of one another and for the world, not only to accomplish the good works God has prepared for us to walk in, but to love one another as Christ has loved us.

ARE WE REACHING OUR 2018 FIRST GOALS?

For 2018 we set for ourselves First, Second, and Third goals. **First Goals are essential:** if we do nothing else, we will do these. **Second Goals are anticipated:** these are important and we are planning to accomplish them. **Third Goals are possible:** if we have the resources, we will try and make these happen.

So, how are our First Goals coming along?

- 1) **Root small groups into our homes and pursue 75% of our congregation's involvement by 2019** — one of my favorite memories so far this year is when my small group had dinner together and we went around the table and told our stories of how we came to meet Jesus. To listen and watch each of them deepened my love for Jesus and for them.

If you're not yet in a small group, you can join one by going to Guest Services. We're hoping to add 1-2 new groups this month.

- 2) **Launch an Elim Grace leadership course/track and move towards expanding our leadership/eldership in 2019** — the course is going well and every month we continue to watch, listen, and learn, diving into topics ranging from self-leadership to church leadership, resolving conflict and having hard conversations, anticipating and leading change, communication and empowering others, etc.
- 3) **Begin groundwork for building the "Bethel Recovery Center" ministry to drug addicts** — we have purchased the Midstate Music building across the street, settled on it becoming a home for women, established some good working relationships and partners in the city and with other organizations. Our biggest prayer here is for a house leader to manage the home and serve the women. This is a missionary kind of calling.

ARE YOU A READER? 12 BOOKS I'VE ENJOYED IN 2018

1. The Critical Journey: Stages In The Life Of Faith (Janet Hagberg)
2. Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting (Marva J. Dawn)
3. Walking With God Through Pain And Suffering (Tim Keller)
4. The Resurrection Of The Son Of God (N.T. Wright)
5. Hope of Nations: Standing Strong In A Post-Truth, Post-Christian World (John S. Dickerson)
6. Awaiting The King: Reforming Public Theology (James K.A. Smith)
7. Grit: The Power Of Passion And Perseverance (Angela Duckworth)
8. Deep Work: Rules For Focused Success In A Distracted World (Cal Newport)
9. The Ideal Team Player: How To Cultivate The Three Essential Virtues (Patrick Lencioni)
10. Great by Choice: Uncertainty, Chaos, and Luck—Why Some Thrive Despite Them All (Jim Collins)
11. Predictable Success: Getting Your Organization On The Growth Track—And Keeping It There (Les McKeown)
12. The Power of Who: You Already Know Everyone You Need To Know (Bob Beaudine)