

**STIRRING UP ADVENT:  
RECIPES FOR RELATIONSHIPS  
(4) GOD'S INTIMACY**

Micah 5:2-5

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**PROLOGUE**

Two women who were having lunch in an elegant hotel were approached by a mutual friend who asked the occasion for the meal. One replied, "We are celebrating the birth of my baby boy." "But where is he?" inquired the friend. "Oh," said the mother, "you didn't think I'd bring him, did you?"

Imagine that — A celebration that excludes the reason for having the celebration! It's kind of like how we treat Christmas, isn't it?

**SCRIPTURE**

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. {3} Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. {4} And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; {5} and he shall be the one of peace (Micah 5:2-5 NRSV).

**INTRODUCTION**

During these four weeks leading up to Christmas we have been exploring the ingredients for healthy relationships as put forth by Jack and Judith Balswick in their book, *The Family: A Christian Perspective On The Contemporary Home*. Their foundational principle is that God's relationship with his people is a model for healthy relationships with one another. The needed ingredients are: covenant, grace, empowerment, and intimacy. The first week we looked at covenant. And although the word covenant is sometimes used in other circles such as business and real estate, we are using the word covenant the way the Bible uses the word covenant. A covenant is a type of enduring relationship based on the commitment to love and be loved. The second week we explored grace. Grace sustains a relationship through a readiness to forgive and be forgiven. The third week we examined empowerment. Empowerment allows a relationship to grow because of a willingness to serve and be served. Intimacy is the

fourth and final ingredient.

### **1. MEANING OF INTIMACY: TO KNOW AND BE KNOWN**

Our first problem is, “What do we mean by intimacy?” It is often used as a euphemism for sexual activity. We live in a highly sexualized society and yet for all that we seem to have difficulty speaking plainly about what sex means.

A fourth grader was given an assignment to write a short report on his family history. He found his mother and asked, "Mom, how was I born?" Caught off-guard by the question and unprepared to discuss the “birds and the bees,” she simply said, "The stork brought you, dear." The boy then found his grandmother and asked, “Grandma, how was my mother born?" Being even more reluctant than the mother to dig into such a delicate subject, she merely smiled and said, "The stork brought her." “And you, Grandma, how were you born?" "The same," she replied, still smiling. He returned to his room and started his report, "According to my research, for at least three generations there has not been a normal birth in our family."

But I am not using the word intimacy as a synonym for sexual activity, rather as a reference to a close personal association where there is a strong feeling of belonging together. This can take place in marital relationships, family relationships, close friendships, and other significant relationships.

The literal meaning of intimacy is “to make something known.” In relationships it refers to knowing another person and being known by that other person on a deep level. Therefore, it is possible for a person to be sexually active and yet never experience intimacy. It is also possible to have close personal associations that do not involve sex and yet achieve a high degree of intimacy.

We were made for intimacy. A major theme of the Bible is that we were made to know God and be known by God. This is what is behind the Christmas story. God has broken into human history to be personally related to us.<sup>1</sup>

This event was foretold by prophets like Micah. He was the one who said the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem and be described as “the one of peace.” This is the peace of a restored friendship with the God who made you.

God made you to enjoy you. God smiled when you were born. God takes delight in your existence. God made you to love you, to know you and be known by you. And he wants

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<sup>1</sup>Balswick, p. 31.

us to know and be known in our other important relationships as well.

## **2. BARRIERS TO INTIMACY: TIME, FEAR, ISOLATION**

But to do that we need to overcome the barriers to intimacy. There are many such barriers but three that stand out are: time, fear and isolation.

Perhaps the single greatest way that we prioritize our lives is through the allocation of time. What we choose to do with the time given to us indicates what we value most. How we use our time, like we spend our money, expresses the condition of the heart. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21).

Time is a gift. We cannot create it. We cannot lengthen it. We cannot earn it. We do not deserve it. Strictly speaking, we are unable even to manage it. We can only manage ourselves within the time allotted us.

Time provides the context for relationships. The rhythms of morning and evening in creation provide the backdrop for fellowship with God and each other. The Bible tells us that if we understand what our time is for, we will engage in loving relationships (Romans 13:10,11).

The lack of time together is a barrier to intimacy. Acts of love cannot be expressed comfortably unless people have spent enough quality time together. Expressions of love will also seem inadequate or even phony if there has not been a sufficient investment in the relationship. If the relationship is superficial, the expressions of love are generally insincere. Cultivating intimacy takes time.

This is why a covenant relationship is necessary for intimacy. In a covenant relationship the parties say to each other, in effect, "I accept you as you are and I will be here tomorrow." This commitment to love and be loved provides the stability needed to invest time in the relationship.

The second barrier to intimacy is fear. We fear making ourselves emotionally vulnerable. There is a certain risking in sharing our feelings and an even greater risk in revealing our feelings for another person. Will we be ignored? Will we be rejected? Will what we share be used against us down the road?

This is why grace is necessary for intimacy. In an atmosphere of grace, persons in the relationship respond out of love and forgiveness for one another and learn to act responsibly in consideration for one another. Grace replaces fear and guilt with freedom to love unconditionally, and without judgment. Unconditional love provides the security needed to share true feelings and express real needs without ridicule or rejection.

The third barrier to intimacy is isolation. This is where one person remains aloof and does not participate emotionally in the relationship. The Balswicks cite studies that indicate that men are far more likely to behave in this way. This may be the result of pressure from the particular culture or ethnic background. "Big boys don't cry" and so on. But it may also be an effort to control the relationship under the mistaken idea that the one who shares least has the most power.

But without reciprocal expressions of love the relationship will be off-balance. And after awhile, even the person who was more expressive will become less expressive. Soon all hope of intimacy diminishes.

A woman accompanied her husband to the doctor's office. After his examination, the doctor called the wife into his office alone. He said, "Your husband is suffering from a serious illness complicated by stress. If you don't do the following, your husband will surely die. Each morning, fix him a healthy breakfast. Be pleasant, and make sure he is in a good mood. For lunch make him a nutritious meal. For dinner prepare an especially nice meal for him. Don't burden him with chores, don't discuss your problems. And most importantly, make love to your husband several times a week. If you can do this for a year, I think your husband will regain his health." On the way home, the husband asked his wife, "What did the doctor say?" She replied, "He said you're going to die."

Empowerment is necessary for intimacy. The Balswicks point out that the most common use of power in relationships is to try to decrease the power of the other person in order to try to control them. But the desire to control people prevents intimacy, destroys healthy relationships, and can lead to abuse.

Empowerment is a healthy alternative to the grab for power in our relationships. Empowerment means using one's own power to help the other person become stronger. It never involves intimidation or force. It is a respectful process that takes place between people in mutually encouraging ways. It is helping each other reach your full potential.

### **3. ACHIEVING INTIMACY: THROUGH EXPRESSING LOVE**

Covenant, grace and empowerment make it possible for people in relationships to freely express their thoughts and feelings. And communicating our thoughts and feelings is the only road that leads to intimacy.

Generally speaking, human beings use only three types of languages. The language of relationship, the language of information and the language of motivation. The language of information we learn in school. We give names to objects. We learn facts and figures. We exchange data. The language of motivation is used by Madison Avenue, politicians, coaches and even preachers. It is the language of persuasion.

You and I are familiar with the language of information and the language of motivation. We use them all the time. But we are inept at the first language, the language of relationship. And even if we manage to start a relationship, we often mess it up.

Charles Swindoll tells the story of a woman who was sitting at the breakfast table and asked her husband, "What if something happened to me and I died first? Would you marry again?" He thought for a while then responded, "Yes, I probably would." Then she asked, "Well, would you bring your new wife to live in this house and have her sleep in our bed?" "Well, I hadn't thought about it, but I probably would," he said. She probed further, "Would you let her use my golf clubs?" To which he replied, "No, because she's left-handed."

It is important that we learn and practice the language of relationship if we want to achieve intimacy. How important? The Balswicks write:

"It is emotionally rewarding for all people to engage with others at a personal and emotional level. Doing so indicates the desire for interaction...Keeping emotions to yourself puts you at risk of losing touch with yourself and others (p. 241)."

Let's consider three different types of relationships. Expressing love is crucial in parent/child relationships. The expression of love in parent/child relationships is the single most important factor in the development of a child. Children who do not experience a strong emotional bond with their parents will spend the rest of their lives compensating for it.

Expressing love is essential in marriage relationships. Having approximately equal expressions of love in marital relations is one of the strongest indicators of the health of the marriage. Jack Balswick says, "Great dissatisfaction and problems are likely to emerge when there is an imbalance in the amount of self-disclosure (p. 248)." Marriage requires affection, companionship and the ability to communicate our feelings.

Expressing love is also a necessity in our relationship with God. For many people this seems a daunting proposition. But it may not be as tough as you think.

Do you remember the first time you ever said "I love you" to somebody? You were probably scared to death - sweaty palms, stomach in a knot, and your heart racing. You anxiously wondered, "Are they going to accept me or are they going to reject me; are they going to say 'I love you' back to me?"

But the wonderful thing about God is that God has taken away the risk in our relationship

with him. God said it first. The Bible says, “We love because [God] first loved us” (1 John 4:19 NRSV).

God said it first to you. God said, “I love you.” God has said it in a thousand ways. He created you. He is taking care of you. Even when you did not know it, he was showing love to you. And he wants you to love him in return and show that love to others. This is why you were made.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is ironic that these three little words, “I love you” which ought to be the most pleasant and effortless thing we say to someone we love, are so terribly hard for most people to say. But as we have seen throughout this series, the healthier the relationship the easier it is to express our true feelings. The recipe for healthy relationships includes four ingredients: covenant — the commitment to love and be loved, grace — the readiness to forgive and be forgiven, empowerment — the willingness to serve and be served, and intimacy — the aim to know and be known. We then need to let God stir up these ingredients in our hearts to form loving, lasting relationships where we learn to say and really mean it, “I love you.”