

## chapter seven

# from isolated to connected

## Deepening Your Relational Circles

IF YOU WERE TO DIE TONIGHT, how many friends would come to your funeral? Not how many *family members*—they're bound by blood. But beyond your family, how many *friends* would show up at your funeral?

If you're like most people, your guess is high—way high. I don't mean to burst your bubble, but one of the realities I've witnessed again and again in my role as a pastor is that people have fewer true friends than they think. Here's an example:

A guy dies in his late fifties from heart trouble. I meet with his wife and their two adult children. They're grieving; they're shocked. We pray together, reminisce, and eventually, in order to plan the memorial service, I have to ask the family how many people will come to the funeral. We want to find the right-size room to hold the service. It's a practical question that must be asked.

And then the widow and the kids begin: "My husband was an

extrovert,” or, “Dad had tons of friends, going all the way back to high school and college. All of them will come. All of his golf buddies will come, and everyone from work. And the whole neighborhood will be there, plus all the guys from the park district football teams he used to play on.” In short, they guess between five hundred and a thousand people will be there for the funeral.

In the early days of my pastoring, I would go with whatever number the family said. If they said they expected between five hundred and a thousand guests, we’d hold the service in our Lakeside Auditorium, which can easily accommodate such a crowd.

And then the funeral day comes. People file in, and (at most) a hundred people show up—in a 4,300-seat auditorium. And seventy-five of them are family.

After the graveside ceremony, the widow and kids make a beeline to me and ask, “Where in God’s name was everyone? He had all these friends. And only a hundred people came?”

I’ve now been through this so many times that I go into protection mode on the family’s behalf right up front. Now, before I ask how many people they expect at the funeral, I offer some disclaimers, such as, “I’m sure this loved one had lots of friends, but in today’s economy,

The number of people we *know* does not equal the number of true friends we have.

not everyone can get off work, and travel costs are high if people are coming from out of town. That will probably cut down significantly on the number of people who will be able to make it.” I try to protect the hearts of families already stricken with grief—because nine times out of ten,

they will overestimate the number of friends who will show up.

The number of people we *know* does not equal the number of true friends we have. Solomon puts it this way: “One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”<sup>1</sup>

It's sad enough when you overestimate a loved one's friendships for a funeral service, but when you wrongly assess the friendship levels in your own relationships, the cost can be much higher. An unevaluated, underdeveloped relational world can wreak havoc on your life. If your relationships are in disarray, simplified living will be a distant dream, rather than a present reality. By evaluating, pruning, expanding, bordering, and deepening your relationships, you can maximize the energy and joy they bring to your newly simplified life.

## DEFINING FRIENDSHIP

If I were to wrestle friendship in all its complexities down to just a few short words, I would define it like this: *to know and be known.* ||

In a true friendship, you move beyond pretending to be someone you're not. You take off your mask, and you say to the other person, "Here's who I really am." And it's reciprocal. A true friend accepts you as you are and says in return, "Here's who I really am too—without my mask." You are accepted, and you accept that person.

True friends love one another, even though we're all a little quirky. We accept each other's faults and unique wiring. There is tremendous acceptance and deep safety in a true friendship.

True friends serve one another. You do what is best for your friends above what is best for yourself. You put their interests ahead of your own, and they reciprocate. There's a give-and-take that satisfies both parties in the friendship.

True friends celebrate with one another. You show up at each other's important life events. You cheer one another's victories. You mark life's milestones together.

Knowing and being known; accepting and being accepted; loving and being loved; serving and being served; celebrating and being celebrated. These are the hallmark ingredients of a true friendship. Who wouldn't want to experience a friendship like that? Our lives would be all the richer.

Too often, though, we settle for “friendships” that fall far beneath this standard.

Relationships, like every other area of life, require regular evaluation, pruning, and strengthening.

## **EVALUATING YOUR RELATIONSHIPS**

### **Stupid Rubs Off**

When I was a boy, one of my good friends moved to the South, and I occasionally visited him for three or four days at a time. I always brought my mitt because we would play baseball at a park near his house every chance we got.

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Every time we left the house to go play ball, my friend’s dad would say in his deep Southern drawl, “Watch out who you hang with after the game, boys, because stupid rubs off.”

*Stupid rubs off.* That was an expression I’d never heard up north, but I knew what he meant. He was warning us not to be influenced by other boys’ stupid decisions, things we knew better than to do.

Stupid rubs off in our grown-up world too. Perhaps you work in an environment where profanity flows like a polluted river all day, every day. Can profanity rub off?

Maybe you work in the financial services industry, where the whole game is making more money, no matter what it takes to get it. Can greed rub off?

At parties where the main event is alcohol consumption, can overdrinking rub off?

I went to a Blackhawks hockey game a few years back, and there were about a half-dozen fistfights during the game. Late in the third period, a bench-clearing brawl broke out. When the game ended, the crowd was all hyped-up. As everyone tried to exit, the normal jostling



that happens when thousands of people exit a stadium soon turned into elbow throwing, shoving, and pushing. I wondered, *Can anger and violence rub off?*

Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, was so aware of this unalterable reality that he admonished us to choose our friends wisely: “Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.”<sup>2</sup>

I’ve heard different versions of the same story about a thousand times:

Someone approaches me after a church service, or out in the community, or in

a social setting, and says, “Hey, Bill, do you remember me? A long time ago, you baptized me,” or, “You helped me find a place to serve around Willow,” or, “You got me connected to a small group.”

“Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.”

PROVERBS 13:20

Then the story comes out: “I was doing great, but then I started hanging out with a group from work that went out together on Friday nights. And then we started hanging out on Saturday nights too. And some of the Saturday nights got a little crazy, and I couldn’t make it to church on Sundays. Then I had to drop my volunteer work because of the time I was spending with those friends. Everything sort of went south from there. I guess I moved God out of the equation.” Then they tell me about some stupid decisions they made, and now their life is a rip-roaring mess—which is why they are speaking with me at this moment. “Will you pray for me?”

And I do. I pray for them. But between you and me, I am so sick of this story. There are a hundred variations of it, but it’s the same stuff-rubbed-off story: “I was good with God; then I started hanging around with some folks, and I started going their way instead of God’s way—and then my life hit a new low. Now everything is a mess. Pastor, will you pray for me?”

Parents start warning their kids about this in junior high: “Don’t hang out with the wrong kids at school.” Stuff rubs off.

Fathers walk their sons around the block before they drive off to college: “Hey, son, find a good set of friends when you get to campus.” Stuff rubs off.

I counsel people at church whose jobs transfer them to other cities around the country or around the world: “Find a great church, a church that teaches God’s Word, where there’s high-integrity leadership; a church that encourages you to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. Then take some time to build quality friendships with godly, mature people in the church and lean into those relationships. If you do, you’ll do fine in that new city.” I encourage them in this way because stuff (good and bad) rubs off.

What Solomon says is absolutely true: “*Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.*” When we surround ourselves with foolish people, we become like them. And when we surround ourselves with wise, mature, good people, their high character rubs off on us too.

## Seven Warning Lights

Taking an assessment of your friendship circle is vital to simplifying your relational world. As uncomfortable as it may make you feel, you must be willing to make necessary course corrections in your friendships. This isn’t being judgmental or condemning anyone; it’s simply being a good steward of your life and having a realistic understanding of others’ natural influence on you.

Plenty of foolish people are perfectly likable, especially when you first meet them, and it takes careful evaluation to peer into the inner core of a person’s character. Solomon lists seven character traits that are so offensive to God, they should act as red warning lights, flashing “Danger!” when we spot them in a friend or acquaintance. His list is helpful when assessing the character of those in your friendship circle:

There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.<sup>3</sup>

Solomon says if you see any of these traits in people who are in your circle of acquaintance, put up your guard. You can be kind to them, pray for them, or help meet a

need in their lives. Invite them to church with you. Try to point them to faith in Christ. But don't even think about inviting them into your inner circle of friendship. Why? Because stuff rubs off. No matter how strong you are, people who are prideful, dishonest, mean-spirited, and divisive will negatively influence your character, inhibit your development as a person, and impede your spiritual growth.

The apostle Paul puts it this way: "Bad company corrupts good morals."<sup>4</sup>

A look at each trait in Solomon's list will help you understand why it's important to filter your close friendships by this standard.

**1. Pride** ("haughty eyes"). People who have haughty eyes look down on others. We might call it *arrogance*. Perhaps you've met someone like this: "I matter; you don't. I'm sophisticated; you're plain. I'm educated; you're ignorant. I'm beautiful; you're average. I'm slender; you're chunky. I'm married; you're single. I'm spiritual; you're secular. I'm young; you're old. I'm a career woman; you're a stay-at-home

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mom. I'm a businessperson; you're a laborer. I'm a Chicagoan; you're a Burb." (I didn't even know what a "Burb" was until recently when a guy from Chicago told me I was one because I live in the suburbs instead of in the city.)

What does the Bible say about pride?

"God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."<sup>5</sup>

"Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall."<sup>6</sup>

"Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you."<sup>7</sup>

Pride is corrosive, and it rubs off. You're going to have a tough time developing Christlike humility and thinking of yourself with sober judgment if your close friends are arrogant, full of pride, and looking down their noses at everyone else.

**2. Dishonesty** ("a lying tongue"). Most of us know to steer clear of people who blatantly lie. But it's equally important to keep our distance from people who fudge the truth or exaggerate; people who think little white lies don't matter. Be kind to these people,

It's tough to become a truth teller if your close friends have "a lying tongue." Stuff rubs off.

pray for them, invite them to church; but someday they will hurt you if they're in your inner circle. It's easy to slip into the same habits they exhibit—exaggerating to make your story more colorful, or dancing around the truth because it's easier than speaking honestly. It's tough to become a truth teller if your close friends have "a

lying tongue." Stuff rubs off.

Incidentally, omissions are lies. When we allow our silence to imply agreement, it's no different from overtly telling a lie. If your friends intentionally deceive others by keeping secrets, they are liars. And that stuff rubs off too. Steer clear, friend.

**3. Mean-Spiritedness** (“hands that shed innocent blood”). This is a no-brainer, right? Don’t invite an ax murderer into your small group. Actually, the meaning of this phrase is a little broader than that. Solomon is warning us to be wary of people who use their power to exploit others. Beware of those who oppress the weak. Beware of individuals who throw their weight around and like to “stick it” to people. Beware of folks who are mean-spirited. It’s a danger signal.

A scene recently returned to my memory that I hadn’t thought about for fifty years. I hesitate to share it, because it still makes me sick, and even though I was only a boy, I wonder if I should have done more at the time.

When I was ten years old and attending a two-week summer camp, I was assigned to a cabin with eight guys I’d never met. The first day of camp, we were all sizing each other up. Even at the young age of ten, we already had a sense of trying to figure out who the leader would be, who the cool guy would be, and so on.

One kid in our cabin was a little older than the rest of us, and he had an infectious kind of charisma, so we all wanted to be his friend. One day, this kid trapped a gopher outside the cabin, using a trash can—which, if you know anything about gophers, requires Olympic-level talent. The rest of us were in awe when he brought his prize into the cabin.

We gathered around, watching the scared little brown creature scurry around in the bottom of the bucket. Then the kid who had caught him pulled out a pocketknife and said, “Let’s torture him!” And he started jabbing at the gopher with the knife.

Most of us had mixed feelings about this plan, but we all wanted to be this guy’s friend. One by one, the other kids got out their knives and joined in.

I was only ten years old, but I knew this was wrong. I knew in my spirit that this was not cool, that this gopher was created by God, and that hurting it for fun was wrong. I knew it was so wrong that

I was willing to risk being “the loser kid” for the next two weeks of camp, if it came to that. So I told the kid holding the bloody knife, “Let the gopher go.”

“It’s just a gopher,” he said. “They’re hard to catch. And I’m going to torture it to death. Are you in or out, Hybels?”

“I’m out,” I said. While the other kids opened their pocketknives and eventually stabbed the poor gopher to death, I went outside the cabin and puked my guts out because I could hear what was going on inside.

I hadn’t thought about that episode in fifty years, but when I read the phrase about being wary of someone who sheds innocent blood, it stirred my memory. Proverbs 12:10 speaks specifically to this scene:

☺ ¶ “The righteous care for the needs of their animals.”

When I read the phrase about being wary of someone who sheds innocent blood, it stirred my memory.

I *hate* violence. I hate it in any form. I hated knowing those kids were carving up that gopher and making it suffer. I hated fistfights in high school. When kids would start pounding each other in the hallway, I went the other way. It made me sick. I refuse to watch cage matches and other violence-for-sport

entertainment on TV. I’ve walked out of more than one movie over the years when the senseless fighting got out of control. I hate violence.

In my late teenage years, right after the Vietnam War, I walked through Walter Reed Medical Center, the military hospital outside of Washington, DC, which has since closed. But at the time, Walter Reed had fifty-five hundred rooms, comprising twenty-eight acres of floor space.

The day I walked those halls changed me. Every room was filled with soldiers coming back from Vietnam. I saw hundreds of young men and women—just a few years older than I was—with mangled bodies, missing limbs, faces burned beyond recognition, vacant



stares, little hope for a bright future; and it made me hate war. *Hate it.* It made me distrust warmongering leaders and politicians, not just in the United States but all over the world.

Violence seems so contrary to the heart of God. It seems so out of sync with God's basic nature and character. When Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, His friend Peter resorted to violence to protect Him. Peter grabbed a sword and cut off the ear of an assistant to the high priest, one of the men who had schemed to frame Jesus.

"But Jesus answered, '*No more of this!*' And he touched the man's ear and healed him."<sup>8</sup>

In the face of raw violence, Jesus healed. He reached down, picked up the guy's ear, and gently restored it. He healed a man who was there to arrest Him and carry Him off to be crucified.

Jesus hated violence. He taught against it. He modeled a degree of gentleness (power under control) that the world had never seen. Even as soldiers were beating Him mercilessly, ripping His beard from His face, and leaving Him naked and exposed, Jesus forgave them.

We live in a violent culture. In fact, our culture sees violence as entertainment, and I wonder if we've lost our way. Violence in sports, violence on TV and in the movies, violence in children's video games—it's become so normative we don't even blink. But stuff rubs off. Have we become so inoculated with it that we don't even notice violence? Have we drifted into an acceptance of violence that the Holy Spirit would have us resist and repel? Does God's Spirit wish we would puke our guts out a little more reflexively at the sight of senseless violence, the shedding of innocent blood?

It's hard to cultivate a heart of gentleness in today's violence-saturated world—and it's even harder when you surround yourself with chest-thumping, violence-loving, bar-brawling buddies. If you hang around with a bunch of people who are enamored of violence and have lost their sense of horror at the shedding of innocent blood, that stuff rubs off.

I have a hard enough time pursuing gentleness. I don't need any bravado junk rubbing off on me. I need more of the Holy Spirit instead.

**4 & 5. Looking for Trouble** ("a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that . . . rush into evil"). We all have read about people who indulge in get-rich-quick schemes or business ventures that prey on the vulnerable. We hear about scams

of one kind or another on the news. Solomon warns about such people who have no qualms about making a quick buck off someone else's vulnerability or gullibility.

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I met a guy one time who felt called by God to leave a very lucrative career to launch an effort to end the production and distribution of child pornography in

the United States. Gripped by the evil of an industry that preys on the most vulnerable, he threw himself wholeheartedly into this venture, and I respect him for doing so. I met with him one day, to hear about and support his efforts.

He told me about all the things he was doing to try to end the production and distribution of child pornography, which is a very complex problem. As I tried to get my head around it, I finally asked, "How does anybody in that industry sleep at night, knowing they're profiteering from the rape and abuse of little boys and little girls?"

He smiled at me, as if to say, *You really don't get it, do you?* Then he explained, "In the porn business, the on-camera people call it 'acting,' the directors call it 'art,' the distributors call it 'free enterprise,' and the video stores call it 'entertainment.' Everybody justifies their part—therefore, nobody is guilty, see?"

I sat at the table shaking my head, thinking, *Are you kidding me? Really?*

You can tell when people are devising a scheme or promoting a scam, because they go out of their way to justify it. When you ask one of these people what they do for a living, they don't say, "I profit from the rape of little girls and little boys." With a straight face, they justify their evil schemes that line their pockets at the expense of the innocent and vulnerable.

You can pray for these people. You can warn them. If they're violating the law, you can call the police to stop them. If they're hurting a child, you'd better stop them! But don't hang around with these people. The devising of evil schemes and the justifying habit that minimizes wrongdoing rubs off.

There are a lot of wicked schemes that don't sink to the level of child pornography. But don't fall into the trap of contrasting such filth with your "little shortcuts here and there" and acquitting yourself by comparison. Sure, you're not selling porn. But in God's eyes, your "corner cutting" and "little integrity lapses" are a big deal. If you're building a business, you know it's hard to run a squeaky-clean, high-integrity company in an ethically gray world. If you wanted to, you could make a few extra bucks by skirting the edge. But don't do it. And don't surround yourself with people who do. Compromise is a slippery slope you don't want to be on.

In God's eyes, your "corner cutting" and "little integrity lapses" are a big deal.

**6. Spreading Gossip and Slander** ("a false witness who pours out lies"). People who are eager to spread false information for the sheer delight of tearing down someone else—these are folks to avoid. Solomon warns: "A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret."<sup>9</sup>

If someone always gives you the lowdown on other people, you can be certain he or she is giving other people the lowdown on you. Don't set yourself up for slander. Keep away from people who tell you the juicy stuff—whether it's true or not. Gossip and slander are the last things you need to rub off on you. We need to be truth tellers and confidence keepers.

7. **Divisive** (“a person who stirs up conflict”). Beware of anyone who *spreads dissension*. Proverbs 16:28 says, “A perverse person stirs up conflict.” It doesn't take long to figure out whether someone is fundamentally a polarizer or a unifier; a bridge builder or a bomb thrower.

I was in a social setting recently, enjoying a pleasant conversation in a circle of people I didn't know very well. A guy with a cocktail in one hand and a plate of hors d'oeuvres in the other came up and began opinionating about politics and the presidential candidates. He started lambasting one of the candidates, saying what “idiotic ideas” this person had, and so on. Within thirty seconds, everyone in that previously congenial group had squared off, sharing pieces of their minds they couldn't afford to lose.

I stood watching all this, shaking my head in amazement at

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how quickly one person had polarized everyone in the circle, causing dissension and strife. I extricated myself from the unpleasantness of that conversation and stepped outside for some fresh air. A verse of Scripture came to mind: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live

at peace with everyone.”<sup>10</sup>

Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers.”<sup>11</sup> I have no shortage of strong opinions, but I have tried all my life to be a bridge builder. Any progress I've made toward that end has been greatly assisted by choosing close friends who are as committed to bridge building as

I am. Today, it just wears me out to be around polarizers and bomb throwers, people who gladly divide groups and people.

One of the greatest blessings of being married to Lynne is that she's an extremely effective bridge builder. She spends many weeks a year in some of the most strife-ridden places on the planet—the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which has been called the rape capital of the world;<sup>12</sup> and Israel and Palestine, where generational conflict and violence rip apart families, villages, and cities. Lynne invests tremendous physical, emotional, and spiritual energy building bridges between people groups, taking part in reconciliation forums, trying to get bitter enemies to talk to one another instead of spilling the blood of their sons and daughters for yet another generation. When you live with a reconciler, a peacemaker, a bridge builder, it rubs off. I am very grateful for all the ways that Lynne's peacemaking has rubbed off on me.

If you're trying to become more of a bridge builder and less of a bomb thrower, keep on the lookout for bridge-building friends to add to your circle. And put a little distance between yourself and the bomb throwers and polarizers. Again, you can pray for them and invite them to church, where they'll be able to hear about the teaching and the life of Jesus Christ, the greatest bridge builder and reconciler in human history. But don't hang with these kinds of people, because stuff rubs off.

Solomon's seven warning lights give us a head start on evaluating those in our friendship circles, so we can make adjustments accordingly. Don't be duped into thinking it's no big deal to hang with people whose character is marked by these signs. They will affect you. Their traits will become yours. Take a step back—and look for people whose strong character will rub off on you instead.

## Nine Welcome Signs

Let's turn this "stuff rubs off" idea on its head: You're at a worship concert for two solid hours. The people around you are singing their

lungs out, hands raised high. You don't know them; you may have never even met them. But it doesn't matter. You share a common bond. Does the spirit of worship rub off? Of course it does.

At work, your department is led by a cheerful woman who stays on her game eight hours a day; she lifts the spirits of everyone in the department. Does a positive attitude rub off? Yes, it does.

Does the spirit of worship rub off?  
Of course it does. . . .

Does a positive attitude rub off?  
Yes, it does.

You work out at a local health club three days a week. During the forty-five minutes you're there, the same people show up regularly. They're fit; they're disciplined; they're fired up. They do their sets. They drink their

protein shakes. They push themselves physically. Do healthy workout habits rub off? Absolutely!

You're at a twelve-step meeting, listening to the other women and men do their work.<sup>13</sup> They're admitting mistakes. They're encouraging each other. They're committing themselves to pursue a different path in life. Does life-altering courage rub off? Beyond a doubt.

In life, through our relationships, stuff rubs off. Good and bad, it rubs off.

The apostle Paul offers a corollary to Solomon's seven warning lights. If you're looking for people whose character will rub off on you in a positive way, Paul's list is a great place to start:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.<sup>14</sup>

This list of character traits is not for the faint of heart. In a world that is more drawn to selfishness, violence, and entitlement, it takes grit to live out these traits. It requires daily, relentless fortitude to



be loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled regardless of the ebb and flow of circumstances. When searching for friends to draw deeper into your inner circle, look for people who exhibit these foundational fruits of the Holy Spirit. They will influence your life in positive ways. Their character will rub off on you.

## Three Levels of Friendship

Once you have a benchmark of warning lights and welcome signs to help you assess the inner character of your friends and acquaintances, the next step is to determine the depth of friendship you have with each person. Taking an honest assessment of your friendship levels helps you be intentional about making adjustments, moving friends of high character deeper into your inner circle and perhaps creating safe distance from those whose weak character will rub off. Again, this is not for the purpose of casting judgment.

No matter a person's character, he or she is of infinite value to God and as such should be of infinite value to you. But having a clear understanding of where each person fits in your life helps you clarify your expectations. And holding reasonable expectations of what you can expect from each friendship will help you simplify your relational world, minimize disappointments, and maximize the energy and effort you give toward your inner-circle friends.

Having a clear understanding of where each person fits in your life helps you clarify your expectations.

**1. Circumstantial Friends.** The people we say hi to at work, the fellow jogger at the gym, the checkout person at the grocery store, the dry-cleaning guy—these are all very nice people. They're friendly to us, and we're friendly to them. But are they true friends? Or are they friends only because of the circumstances in our lives?

They're circumstantial friends. They're not coming to your funeral. They're not coming to mine. They are friends by circumstance, and when circumstances change, the friendship ends. It's that simple.

Occasionally, someone who is a friend by circumstance becomes a true friend. But most of the time, if your usual checkout lady at the grocery store transfers to a new location, you don't track her down and change grocery stores so you can continue your "friendship." If the guy who has worked out near you at the gym for the past four years is suddenly AWOL, you don't do an online search to find him. If your dentist retires, you look for another one, but you don't start making lunch dates with your old dentist every six months to keep up. You just accept the fact that life moves on. These kinds of relationships come and go.

Circumstantial friends are not *fake* friends. You're not being insincere when you converse with them. But what brought you together was a job, a business connection, or a service they provided. And when these circumstances change, there's a strong likelihood you'll never see these people again. So be friendly, but be careful about adding circumstantial friends to your projected list of funeral attendees.

A few months ago, I was chatting with some people in a small group I've been a part of for about fifteen years. One of the professional women in the group, who has thrown her heart and soul into her team at work for two decades, shared that she felt God was whispering to her to pursue a different vocation in the next season of her life. She was pretty sure God wanted her to move into this new vocation, but she was reluctant to make the announcement at work because she felt bad about letting her team and boss down.

"I can't work up the courage to go in and resign, because we're just like family," she said. "They will be devastated."

Then she stopped and waited for a response from the group.

*Silence.* As sensitively as I could, I said, “Hey, my friend, if God is telling you to move into a different career, you’ve got to move on. I know you don’t want to disappoint anybody at work, but the fact is, the day after you tell them you’re quitting, they’ll have a plan in place for how they’re going to replace you. It’s not that they won’t miss you, but they’ll move on without you.”

She burst out crying. Not the reserved, sentimental type of crying, but the slobbery, messy, uncontrollable kind. At first, I was worried she might leap across the table and strangle me. But she settled down and said, “Bill, you’re absolutely right. They *will* move on without me. They will be fine. I let myself believe that we’re family, that we’re true-to-the-end friends, when really we’ve just been brought together by work circumstances. We care about each other because of the years we’ve worked together, but we’re not *actually* family.” She was right. She and her coworkers were wonderful, warm, circumstantial friends, but they were not true friends or family.

Circumstantial friends matter. You can and should have lots of them. You should be radically loving and kind in every exchange you have with your circumstantial friends.

You ought to pray for them and invite them to church with you. But if you consider these people true friends, you will be disappointed. Again, they’re not coming to your funeral.

Don’t spread yourself too thin with circumstantial friendships. You have only so many relational dollars to spend, and you must steward them wisely. “The righteous choose their friends carefully, but the way of the wicked leads them astray,” Solomon cautions in Proverbs 12:26. Make sure you choose your true friends carefully—and leave yourself enough energy to invest in those true friendships.

You should be radically loving and kind in every exchange you have with your circumstantial friends.

**2. True Friends—for a Season.** In the early days of our church, I built a friendship with a guy of high character. Our friendship grew stronger and evolved to the “true friend” level. I thought it was going to be a lifelong friendship. We had twenty years invested in it.

The two of us hung out with a small group of guys in those days. One day, my friend came to our small group meeting at a local restaurant. As he sat down at the table, he announced, “Hey, I sold my company over the weekend, and I’m going to move to a sunshine state next month. Thanks for all the great memories. I’m still going to root for the Bears, though. You know me—I’m a Bears fan through and through.”

I sat at the table, stunned. It had never occurred to me that this guy’s friendship would be torn out of my life. Really, I was just floored. This is how a twenty-year friendship ends? With, “I’m moving to a sunshine state; thanks for the memories—I’ll be a loyal Bears fan”? *Joke’s on me.* I thought my friendship with this guy was going to make it for the long haul. Sure, we could still call and e-mail. We could still visit once in a while. But the closeness we shared by living our lives side by side, day in and day out, was shattered. I was disillusioned about friendship for quite a while after that.

I wish someone had taught me when I was a much younger man that even the true friendships I develop will actually be *seasonal friendships*.

I wish someone had taught me when I was a much younger man that even the true friendships I develop—like the relationship I had with this guy, and maybe even the majority of true friendships—will actually be *seasonal*, rather than lifelong. Our lives

ebb and flow in seasons, and our friendships follow this pattern.

Around the same time my Bears-loving friend announced his impending move, another friend, by God’s design, sent me a CD out of the blue. He is a leadership-oriented lecturer, and in that CD

this one  
is real hard

lecture, he reflected on how some of his most meaningful friendships had lasted for only five, ten, or even twenty years; and then, for all good reasons, they changed. Someone moved. Someone started spending winters in Florida. Some friends went through a divorce, and things got all funky. Whatever the reason, there was an event that redefined the friendship dynamic.

My friend's point was that many of us will invest in and fully enjoy some very meaningful, true friendships; but we shouldn't be surprised if, for one reason or another, life reshuffles the deck every so often. Through no one's fault, things change. As wise King Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 3, everything in life has its season—including friendships.

The more I reflected on the seasonal nature of even the best friendships, the worse I felt about my original vision-casting when we started Willow Creek. I was twenty-two years old and naive about friendships and how life works. When I stood before the staff and the tiny little core of Christ followers who met in a rented movie theater in Palatine, Illinois, I would say things like this: "Hey, gang, let's build this really cool church and invite people to come into a relationship with God. Let's work hard together and play hard together, and be like family to one another. Let's do this for forty years or so, and then we'll all retire together in the same retirement community, where we'll sit in rocking chairs all day, sipping lemonade and drooling and talking about the good old days. Let's put our hands in the center of this circle and let's do our whole lives together. Are you in?"

And because that vision was so powerful and attractive, a lot of people put their hands in the center of the ring and said, "We're in. We're in for life!"

But every few years, stuff would happen. A core family would get transferred because of work. Another family would move across the country to take care of aging parents. In some cases, families simply



decided there was another church that fit them better. And the pain of those departures went extra deep because it felt like the death of the dream I'd had. I really thought we would do our whole lives together.

The high bar of expectation I had set was not realistic for how long our friendships could last in the real world.

I now see that my vision was naive and perhaps caused unnecessary pain for those who moved out of the circle. The high bar of expectation I had set was not realistic for how long our friendships could last in the real world.

**3. Lifelong Friends.** Sometimes circumstances and chemistry align in such a way that friendships really do last a lifetime. By God's goodness, the four original couples who started our church—Joel and Cathy Jager, Scott and Laurie Pederson, Tim and Erin VandenBos, and Lynne and me—are all still here, forty years and counting, serving together and doing life together. Many others who threw their hands in back at the beginning still attend our church and are actively involved—many of them on staff. It has been one of God's most generous gifts in my life.

For obvious reasons, we cannot force or manufacture lifelong friendships. They are forged in the trenches of everyday life—and, by definition, they take a lifetime to develop. I believe if we invest ourselves fully and freely, even as we hold these relationships with open hands, God in His grace will allow us a certain number of friendships that *stick* for the long haul of life. These friendships are a treasured blessing.

These days, when I talk to our staff and key volunteers at Willow, I describe our relationship a little differently. I say, "Hey, gang, listen. God has knit our hearts together during this exciting era of our church. No one knows how long this season will last, so let's soak it up and enjoy it to the fullest. Let's receive it as a gift from God and



squeeze every drop of potential from the love we share together. If someday, for whatever reason, this season draws to a close and God deploys you to another assignment in His Kingdom, let's thank Him on our knees that we got to live this season of friendship and ministry together."

When I cast the vision in this way, it feels truer to the Scriptures, and I know I'm setting a more realistic bar of expectation about how life and friendships really work. And it frees people to follow God's leading with an open heart through the seasons of their lives.

We need this reality check once in a while. Viewing each true friendship as a season heightens our gratitude for each day and week and month that we get to enjoy those people. I'm not minimizing how deep and how loving seasonal friendships can be. They can be transforming. They can be life-giving and fun. But you might not make it all the way to the retirement porch where the rocking, lemonade sipping, and drooling are going on. You might actually retire with a whole different set of friends than the ones you have right now. It's possible. And they might prefer shuffleboard over rocking chairs; you never know.

Viewing each true friendship as a season heightens our gratitude for each day and week and month that we get to enjoy those people.

## **PRUNING YOUR RELATIONAL CIRCLES**

A friend told me a story that illustrates the process of making adjustments to our friendship circles. Many years back, her parents bought a home that was twenty years old. The house was in good repair, but the yard needed some work. Two apple trees on the property had clearly never been pruned. Hundreds of tiny limbs shot out in every direction, crisscrossing one another, blocking the sunlight and keeping air from circulating through a tangled morass of leaves. As a

result, even though the trees were quite large, only a few small apples hung from the branches.

One afternoon, the husband got out his chain saw and began hacking away at those trees, leaving nothing but the trunks and central branches. Huge piles of leafy twigs were all that remained of the foliage. His wife was appalled. “But the trees were so beautiful!” she complained.

“These trees are meant for apples, not just beauty,” he told her. “Trust me, this is what was needed.”

Once the wife got over the horror of her husband’s assault on the trees, his brutal pruning job became a bit of a joke. Every time she looked at those apple trees, she laughed at how sparse they looked. But the following spring, her husband got the last laugh when the trees grew new, healthy branches that allowed plenty of light and air throughout. By May, the new branches were covered in white blossoms, and in September, the couple harvested buckets of juicy,

red apples. The wife was now a believer:  
Pruning works!

Harsh as it may  
sound, you  
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that belong on  
the brush pile.

We have arrived at the most difficult part of this chapter: *pruning your friendships*. Harsh as it may sound, you probably have some relationships that belong on the brush pile. You may have some friends whose “stuff” is rubbing off on you, and

you need to cut back the time you spend with them. And you can probably think of a handful of people you wish you could spend more time with. By purposefully pruning your relationships, you will make room for new, healthier friendships—relationships that will bear fruit.

Perhaps your list of friends and acquaintances doesn’t require the level of butchery that the apple trees required. You can put down your chain saw. But take seriously the challenge to make some ad-

## EXPANDING YOUR FRIENDSHIP CIRCLE

Once you've completed some much-needed pruning in your relationship circles, you'll find you have room for healthy, new growth in the area of friendships. You'll have margin for making investments in friendships that will bring energy and joy to your now-simplified relational world.

Chances are, you need some new friends anyway—people whose high character will rub off on you. You need wise friends whose faith is important to them and who want to move forward on this God-guided adventure. How do you find these people? Where do they hang out? Probably not at Hooters or the local pub. Probably not at a cage-fighting event.

If you're looking to meet like-minded Christ followers who are serious about growing in their faith, start hanging out where people of faith gather. Join a Bible study at work. Attend a church function. Sign up to serve at a faith-based charity event. Start socializing with your Christian friends and meet *their* Christian friends.

But let me be crystal clear about one thing: It's not your church's job to provide you with a new set of really wise, cool friends who live near you, enjoy all the same interests, and have kids the same age as yours. The church may provide an environment where you can find these friends, but it's *your* job to take the initiative. It's *your* job, as the Holy Spirit prompts you, to take those risks. As you step out in faith, God will guide and provide.

If you're looking to meet like-minded Christ followers who are serious about growing in their faith, start hanging out where people of faith gather.

## **BORDERING YOUR FRIENDSHIPS**

Reordering your friendships can be tricky, but I can tell you what I've learned from the times I've seen it done well.

### **Bring Them Along**

Perhaps you're in a season where you're growing in your relationship with God faster and more sincerely than ever before. But the same cannot be said of your close friends. This is a little awkward.

Try your best to bring your close friends along on your spiritual adventure. This thought never even occurs to some sincere Christ followers, but it is actually quite normal in most other areas of friendship. Example: A couple of friends decide to take a cooking class, and they say to the rest of their friends, "Let's take the class together!"

Or a couple decides to sign up for ballroom dancing lessons. They say to their friends, "Let's all give it a go. What have we got to lose?"

Or perhaps a guy who plays on a park district basketball team invites the rest of his team to volunteer with him at a soup kitchen over Thanksgiving. He says, "I know this is out of our comfort zones, but why not stretch ourselves? We'll all be better for the experience."

If only one or two of your close friends are interested in doing some spiritual exploring with you, that's okay. Bring them along!

If your spiritual life is igniting in new ways these days, why not try to fire up your friends as well? Invite them to a church service or special event. Invite them to your small group. Invite them to a class designed for people exploring faith. It's what friends do. They try new stuff together.

If all goes well, perhaps you and your entire circle of friends will walk into your spiritual futures together. I've seen this happen. I've seen groups of people come to Christ together and grow in faith together because someone in their group said, "Let's try this adventure together." I've seen groups of friends

get baptized together, and then learn how to serve together and grow together. They forge friendships that can last for eternity.

If only one or two of your close friends are interested in doing some spiritual exploring with you, that's okay. Bring them along!

## Let Them Go

It's possible that some of your friends will not be interested in pursuing the spiritual journey with you. What then?

The best solution is to get on your knees and ask for wisdom from God. You don't want to blow up relationships unnecessarily. I've heard too many horror stories of friends who essentially fired their non-Christian friends with a spirit of judgment. Those friends are left shaking their heads, asking, "What did we do? We're the same people as before. We were good enough for you *before* you got all spiritual on us. What happened?"

It's much better to proceed slowly, sensitively, and with great discernment, because friendships matter, and they shouldn't ever be uprooted or pruned in a cavalier fashion. I advise you to talk warmly, openly, and humbly with your circle of friends about this topic. It's perfectly appropriate to say, "Hey, gang, I love you guys. I love each one of you. Lately, my faith has begun to mean more and more to me. It's causing me to rethink some things. And because of how much our friendship means to me, I want you to be a part of this journey I'm on. Would you join me?"

If you talk openly to your circle of friends, who knows where that conversation might lead? Some of your friends might freak out or bolt. That happens sometimes. You can't stop people from opting out. If this happens, you need to let them go.

Obviously, stay in touch with them, even from a distance. Who knows? Someday they might become more open to pursuing faith, and you might be the only person of faith they know. If you keep in touch, they can reach out to you when they're ready.

## Say Good-Bye

Sometimes you need to create space in a relationship, or even end a friendship altogether. “Walk with the wise and become wise,” Solomon says, “for a companion of fools suffers harm.”<sup>15</sup>

To put it bluntly, certain friendships are harmful to you. They can hold you back. The very people you call “friends” can beat you down. If the wrong kind of stuff is rubbing off on you; if your friends aren’t cheering you on or looking out for your best interests; if they want you to stay in the same rut they’re in, the one you used to enjoy together but you know isn’t good for you—it’s time to move on.

There’s no easy way to say good-bye to a friendship, but some ways are better than others.

Sometimes the friend who is stuck in the rut is your spouse. This gets tricky. Because you’ve made a covenant before God and promised “for better or worse,” you cannot be flippant about cutting off this relationship. While God hates divorce, Scripture does allow room for

an abused or abandoned spouse to find protection through the ending of that marriage. If you are married and your spouse is harming you, *do not wait around, thinking things will magically get better*. They won’t. Take action. Seek wise counsel on how to best proceed, especially when children are involved.

There’s no easy way to say good-bye to a friendship, but some ways are better than others:

**Don’t choose avoidance.** Don’t start hiding from your friends. Don’t ignore their texts or voice messages. Don’t no-show to commitments you’ve made. In short, *don’t do things that would make you less than a friend*. Just because your life is switching onto a new track, that doesn’t invalidate the friendships you’ve had. You can bow out gracefully without “disappearing.” Treat your old friends the way you would want to be treated.



**Don't be judgmental.** Don't make value statements about how poor their life choices are compared to your now-better choices. Remember, those were *your* life choices too, until recently! Let your example speak for itself. Make changes in your life that will be evident to your friends over time.

**Choose honesty and grace.** If you need to part ways with a certain friend, sit down with the person and say, "I'm moving on with my life. I'm changing direction. What worked for me for many years is no longer working for me. I think I'm figuring some stuff out, and I wish you would come along with me. If you're dead set against it, I understand. But I have to move on!"

These are excruciatingly difficult conversations. But they need to happen.

Continue to pray for your old friends and occasionally circle back to touch base with them, hoping you'll see some movement. But don't let an old friendship keep you from taking the journey God has called you to take. Nothing and no one should hold you back. Sometimes you just need to move on!

## **JESUS' RELATIONAL CIRCLES: 72-12-3-3**

Jesus set a precedent for us and showed us how to border friendships and maintain healthy friendship circles. He had a large circle of friends—at least seventy-two who were close enough to be called *disciples* (according to Luke 10:1). These were the people He sent ahead to the villages and towns He planned to visit. They did ministry together, and Jesus coached them.

He also hand-selected twelve disciples to be His "small group." For the entire three years of His ministry on earth, these twelve men lived their day-to-day lives with Jesus. Jesus also had two inner circles of friends—the men and women who knew Him best.

His first inner circle included Peter, James, and John, His

three closest friends. These were the three He asked to join Him to pray on a high mountain, where they witnessed Jesus' transfiguration. These same three men accompanied Him deeper into the garden of Gethsemane while the rest of the disciples stayed back, just before Jesus was arrested.

Jesus set a precedent for us and showed us how to border friendships and maintain healthy friendship circles.

Do you think it was awkward when Jesus singled out these three friends as His inner circle? I do. But Jesus understood that it was more important for Him to invest in these three close friends than to worry too much about others feeling jealous or left out. He needed the intimacy of an inner circle, and He recognized that bordering His inner circle included making some cuts. He was still close to the other nine, but He *chose* the three. And He held to that decision.

His second inner circle was with three siblings—Mary, Martha, and Lazarus—as we discussed in chapter 1. These three were not part of the twelve, but they were likely part of the seventy-two. Jesus felt at home with this family. They were His “kitchen table” friends. He could relax with them. He could bank on good food, a comfortable bed, and warm conversation whenever He stopped by. He found friendship and safety at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

If the Son of God required two distinct inner circles of friends, what does that suggest for us as His followers?

Perhaps God has been nudging you long before now about pruning your friendships. Maybe He's prompting you to get your relational world in better order. Might it be time for you to redefine some of your current relationships and forge new friendships along the way?

## **DEEPENING YOUR INNER CIRCLE**

### **Take Small Steps**

Few things are more awkward than beginning a friendship with someone who makes a great first impression, diving headfirst into that new relationship, and then quickly discovering that this person is not someone you want to get closer to.

Another person, who's a little bit harder to get to know, might be worth the extra effort because he or she has the depth and wisdom you seek. Be patient. Take small steps—and avoid having to take awkward steps back because you jumped in too soon.

### **Invest Time**

Deepening friendships takes time. Your simplified, holistic calendar, which contains your commitments to work, home, church, and friendships, is a great tool to use when it comes to carving out time for deepening your relationships. If you're prone to letting the urgent (appointments, work commitments) take priority over the important (relationships), discipline yourself to schedule time for these new friendships.

Be patient. Take small steps—and avoid having to take awkward steps back because you jumped in too soon.

### **Create Shared Experiences**

Getting together for coffee or lunch provides an opportunity for conversation, which is the foundation of getting to know people better. But shared experiences beyond a casual get-together can augment and cement a developing friendship. A friend of mine knows he is prone to not prioritize friendships as much as he should, so he invited a new friend to join him in a shared hobby—photography. They walk trails together with their cameras, taking photos and engaging in conversation during these shared experiences.

My wife, Lynne, is good at creating shared experiences with friends. She often invites a girlfriend along when she travels to speak or participate in conferences or events. They inevitably get into some adventures together and create memories through these shared travel experiences. My preference is to invite friends onto sailboats or powerboats. We join together doing the work of sailing or motor-ing, and we enjoy good food and conversation on the open water. Memories are made there that cannot be made over a sedate cup of coffee or a restaurant meal.

Volunteering is another effective shared experience when it comes to building friendships. Find a common cause and engage in it together.

### **Wait for the Volley**

If you find you're doing all the initiating in a new friendship, it might be wise to wait for your new friend to return the volley. Make sure that he or she is interested in deepening the friendship with you—and that he or she has the time and desire to invest in your relationship. If you are unsure where you stand, *ask*. Make sure the interest in a deeper friendship is mutual before putting all your eggs in that basket.

### **Take Off Your Mask (First)**

When you have taken some baby steps into your new friendship and you feel confident that the desire for a deepening friendship is mutual, begin to take off your mask.

Don't freak out the other person by unpacking all your dirty laundry over coffee at Starbucks. Rather, start with a small truth about yourself that you don't share with just anyone, and see how the person handles the responsibility of that truth in the coming weeks. If your confidence is kept and your friend is willing to reciprocate by sharing at equal depths, you are well on your way to a rewarding friendship.

Free tip: Beware of people who want you to do all the sharing

and never reveal anything of significance from their own lives. An inability, or unwillingness, to be vulnerable to another, or a resistance to seeing one's own flaws—these are major red flags.

There is a place for people who do all the sharing. It's called a counselor's office. But in a true friendship, the sharing needs to be reciprocated by both parties.

## **In a Crisis, Show Up**

You cannot orchestrate this last tip. You cannot (or at least you should not!) plan a crisis in your life or your new friend's life. But in a deepening friendship, when a crisis arises, *show up*. Deep friendships are forged in the fire of pain. If your friend experiences a personal loss of any kind, extend yourself. Don't wait to be asked; depending upon the depth of the pain, your friend may not have the emotional energy to ask for help. Show up with food, time, assistance, or whatever the situation calls for. Most of all, be present.

Beware of people who want you to do all the sharing and never reveal anything of significance from their own lives.

If you're the one who encounters a season of pain, let your friends walk alongside you. Don't isolate yourself. Let them in. Time and again, relationships have moved from mere acquaintanceship to inner-circle friendship during a season of crisis.

## **A SIMPLIFIED LIFE WORTH LIVING**

You will greatly simplify your life when you fine-tune your relational world. Prune wisely and with determination. Create space for new growth that will bear fruit in your life—spiritual, emotional, and relational fruit. Life is too rich with opportunity to walk it alone. Invest yourself in people whose high character will rub off on you.

The effort you put forth to prune your relational world, expand

your friendship circles, and deepen your inner circle of friends will pay huge dividends. When you simplify your friendships, you are well on your way to leading a richer, fuller, more joy-filled life. You are on the path toward a simplified life worth living.

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## **ACTION STEP: IDENTIFY YOUR CURRENT RELATIONSHIP CIRCLES**

In your journal or on a computer spreadsheet, create five columns and label them as follows: Seventy-two, Twelve, Three, Distant, and Potential.

### **SEVENTY-TWO**

In the first column, list your current acquaintance-level friendships. This list includes people from all areas of your life: coworkers, neighbors, church friends, committee members, family, etc. Maybe you

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can think of only twenty-five people for this column; or maybe there's a hundred. The names on this list are people you don't know well. Most likely you have never socialized with them one-on-one or as couples, and you've never shared a significant conversation.

### **TWELVE**

In the second column, list your current friends, your "twelve." There might be six people on this list or there might be twenty, depending on your personality and season of life. This list represents people you know a little better, socialize with occasionally, and would consider a friend—family included. These are the people you do life with throughout the week.



### THREE

In the third column, list your current inner circle. This might include a spouse, adult children, or best friends. Again, it doesn't have to be exactly three. But it should be a smaller handful.

### DISTANT

In the fourth column, list your significant relationships with people who live out-of-town. These are people who might be in your "Twelve" or "Three" columns if they lived nearby.

Note: While these are valuable friendships, it's not realistic to expect the same kind of "doing life together" relationships from these people that you can experience with those who live near you. If you want to keep them in your inner circle, develop a strategy for connecting at least weekly.

### POTENTIAL

In the last column, list a handful of people you wish you knew better, who might be potential friends. These should be people you have a realistic chance of becoming friends with. Don't put Oprah on your list unless you live next door to her. Don't add Chris Tomlin unless you play backup in his band and have regular contact with him. Be realistic. Who do you know and admire for their Christlike character? Who do you think might be worth making an initial volley of friendship toward? Put them on your list.

Once you've completed your five lists, save them. Then begin making adjustments to the columns, creating a blue-sky picture of where you'd like to see your relational world a year from now. Move people from one column to another, and highlight names you know need to go.

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## **ACTION STEP: PRUNE YOUR CURRENT RELATIONSHIP CIRCLES**

Review the highlighted names of current friends who you know aren't healthy for you—and plan to create a safer distance between you and them. Over the next couple of weeks, begin praying for God's wisdom in making the necessary adjustments in those friendships.

Put a date on your calendar two weeks out. This is the date when you will begin the process of engaging these people in the kind-but-honest conversations we discussed. Don't avoid. Don't delay. Honor these friends by being proactive, compassionate, and straightforward.

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## **ACTION STEP: EXPAND AND DEEPEN YOUR NEW FRIENDSHIP CIRCLES**

### **EXPAND**

List three risks you can take in the next month to expand your exposure to potential new friends. Make your list and add each item to your calendar.

### **DEEPEN**

Review your "Three" column and your "Potential" column. Write the names of three people you wish you had a closer friendship with, and write a small step you can take with each potential friendship. Perhaps set up a coffee date. Invite them to a movie and then grab dessert. Ask if they want to volunteer with you at your church's next event. Pick something easy and nonthreatening, but something that will help the two of you explore your friendship a little more closely.

Making adjustments to our relational circles takes prayer, discernment, and a fair amount of fortitude. But it's one of the most effective energy investments we can make when it comes to simplifying our lives.