

“Building a Foundation of Trust”

Healing the Racial Divide – Study #6

Introduction

It's one thing to sit around with Christian brothers and sisters talking about the things that are dividing the people in our nation, but it's another thing to have the courage to go out and forge an authentic relationship with a person from the other side. Can blacks actually move past so many bad experiences and give a white person an honest chance without prejudging what he or she is thinking? If you are white, do you have the courage to open your heart to your black brother or sister who may be suspicious of your motives? Sounds kind of dangerous and risky, doesn't it?

“It's All About Relationships”

When it comes to taking chances to show God's love to our neighbors – even those across the racial divide – we can have complete confidence in our Lord's presence and His strength. Jesus has a history of faithfulness, and He has always kept His promises. If He bled and died for you, do you think you can lean on Him now and trust Him to help you reach across the racial divide?

But you may be thinking, “I wouldn't know where to begin.” And, to be sure, there is no “magic bullet” to mend the racial divide in America. The truth of the matter is this: if you want to know how to change the hate speech, to rebuild the brokenness in our society, and to heal the racial anxiety in our communities, the secret is *relationships*! Any hope we have of overcoming racial tension, any hope of seeing beyond color, is based on our ability to build authentic relationships. A caring friendship will break through the distrust based on untrue stereotypes. So, how do you do that? How do you develop a circle of trust? There are five key elements to developing a circle of trust, and Jesus shows us what they look like in John Chapter 4, where He has a conversation with a Samaritan woman who just arrived at the town well to get water.

A Little Background

Do you remember what kind of relationship existed between Jews and Samaritans? That's what makes this interaction between Jesus and this Samaritan woman so remarkable. Keep in mind that this encounter was no accident. There are no “coincidences” with Jesus. In fact, Jesus did not travel the conventional Jewish route to get from Judea to Galilee. The standard practice was to avoid Samaritan territory at all cost. To do this, Jews crossed the Jordan River south of Samaria and traveled north along the east bank. But this particular time, Jesus did the unthinkable. He intentionally went right through Samaritan territory. He had a divine appointment with the women at the well. This was not an accidental meeting. It was planned and purposeful.

Jesus reached the town of Sychar at midday and stopped to rest at Jacob's well. He sent the Twelve off to buy food. That way, He could wait alone for the Samaritan woman to arrive. If this was any normal woman, Jesus would have been left waiting for hours. Usually, people went to the well in the morning and late afternoon. But this woman came at midday. As we will learn from Jesus shortly, she was a woman of bad reputation in town and was trying to avoid the whispers and the looks of disapproval from her neighbors. Not only was Jesus intentionally reaching across the cultural divide, but He was intentionally reaching across a social divide as well.

This encounter normally would never have taken place because of the way both Jewish and Samaritan culture viewed and treated women of that time. Jesus broke three major social rules just to reach out and speak to her:

1. A Middle Eastern man never spoke to a woman in public, not even to his wife, mother, or sister.
2. No Jew ever talked to a Samaritan. Jews viewed Samaritans as traitors in the sense that they betrayed their faith when they intermarried with Gentile foreigners. The Jews and Samaritans hated and avoided each other.

3. No self-respecting man, especially a teacher, would ever speak to a woman of such despicable reputation. This woman was a well-known social outcast.

Jesus ignored all these social barriers when He reached across the divide to begin forming a relationship with the Samaritan woman. He revealed Himself as the Messiah. He offered her the much-needed gift of forgiveness, redemption, and a new direction for her life. This Samaritan woman took a hearty drink from His cup of living water.

This new life in Christ so impacted her that she ran back to town to witness to the very neighbors who despised and rejected her. These men and women came to Jesus and begged Him to stay with them a few days longer. All of this because Jesus reached across the divide to forge a relationship with one lost and forsaken woman. She was so overwhelmed by our Lord's grace and kindness that she proclaimed with unembarrassed excitement the arrival of the promised Messiah.

A Circle of Trust

Let's take a closer at this text and see how Jesus developed a "circle of trust" in this account.

Establish and Maintain Integrity

Integrity is the foundation of trust in any relationship. Integrity, by definition, means keeping promises and always telling the truth, no matter how difficult it might be. In a relationship, it is so easy not to say what needs to be said. We do that because we don't want to hurt someone's feelings. However, if we are going to have an authentic relationship, we need to have the freedom to share open and honest truths. If the relationship you are developing has integrity, it can stand the test of time. Let's listen in:

A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." (For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to Him, "How is it that You, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." The woman said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do You get that living water?" (John 4:7-11)

1. How does Jesus establish a relationship with the Samaritan Woman?
2. What challenges did He have to overcome with regard to integrity?
3. If we are going to connect with people of a different ethnicity or color, and there has been a culture of distrust already set in people's mind, how do we establish and maintain integrity?

Open and Clear Communication is Important

One of the biggest problems we have seen in the racial divide is the way people are not really hearing one another. Black America says, "Black Lives Matter"; white Americans assume they mean "only black lives matter." So the whites respond, "All lives matter!" The blacks hear that and think whites are saying, "No, black lives don't matter—not to us!" Since neither side hears what the other is really saying, tensions arise and the distance only grows.

This happens so often when we think we know what the other person is thinking. But notice, we are doing something else too. We are breaking God's Eight Commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). Martin Luther explained it this way, "We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way." That means, do not automatically assume the worst – but assume the best. If he or she says something that sounds wrong in your ears, ask for an explanation, and really try to understand and talk it out. That is what this woman did. She didn't understand what Jesus meant, so she asked. Let's listen in again:

“Where do You get that living water? Are You greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to Him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.” (John 4:11–15)

The woman at the well thought she heard Jesus offer her magical earthly water. She heard, “Here, drink this and all your physical problems of thirst will be solved. You will no longer have a need to come here and draw water from this well.” But is that what Jesus said? Was He just offering her temporary relief, or was it something much deeper? Jesus entered into the conversation with the woman because it afforded Him an opportunity to quench her thirst with living water.

4. Think about a time when you were hurt by something someone said, and then later found out you had heard wrong.
5. When it comes to REALLY listening to others, what comes most naturally for you? What is most challenging for you?

Consider One Another as Equal Partners in the Relationship

Trust is established when you begin this relationship as equals. Now, that may sound strange, but often we enter into a relationship with a sense of superiority. We might be thinking to ourselves, “I have something valuable to offer that person.” If the relationship begins with a hierarchical mindset, it will start at a huge disadvantage for both parties. You don’t develop authentic, healthy relationships when one partner feels superior. It is hard to respect and find value in someone you think is beneath you, and hard to open up to someone who thinks he or she is above you.

Again, we see this equality modeled for us by Jesus as He speaks to the woman at the well. He doesn’t treat her like a slave and demand water, He politely asks her. He offers her living water. He doesn’t accuse her of living an immoral life, He merely lays out the facts that she has been married to five men and is now living with another who is not her husband. Even when she brings up the topic of the coming Messiah, Jesus simply tells her, “I who speak to you am He.” Jesus doesn’t belittle her or degrade her. He treats her as an equal throughout the discussion.

6. Being the almighty Son of God, Jesus came to His discussion with the Samaritan woman at the well from a superior position. But how did His humble approach make her more open to discussion—especially when He wanted to confront her immorality and turn her from it?
7. Describe a time when you approached someone from a superior position and attitude. How might it have been different if you would have come to that person as an equal?

Focus on Shared Interest and Values

When you are developing a relationship, it helps if you can focus on your similarities rather than always pointing out what makes you different. What do you both commonly value? God? Family? Golf? What are your passions, your fears, your struggles? When you have shared experiences with a person, you can move on to share lessons you learned from those experiences. It is often in this situation that the deepest and strongest connections will be formed, through the fires of trials. In an attempt to find common ground, ask some questions: What gives you joy? What challenges do you face? What do you fear? Where are you hurting? What can we do as a body of believers to address your pain and show you mercy?

Besides helping you get to know this person better, the answers to these questions will end up being a great list of prayers to bring to God on behalf of this new friend. God will use these prayers to knit your hearts more closely together.

Be Willing to Be Vulnerable

How does that look? It requires a willingness to be transparent and authentic, having an openness to share your mistakes and faults. When you are vulnerable and have nothing to hide, you radiate trust. Though Jesus had no mistakes or faults, He made Himself vulnerable. He went into enemy territory, Sychar, to sit by a well all alone, and broke all the social norms to connect with a woman who was obviously immoral and an outcast. And Jesus did this because He thought their eternal relationship was important enough to put His comfort, life, and welfare on the line.

In closing, for those who thought the theoretical was hard, now we get down to the nuts and bolts. Changing the culture happens slowly, over time, through forming deep and authentic communities, one relationship at a time. Jesus did this by offering the woman at the well a different direction for her life. She in turn went back rejoicing and brought her whole town to Jesus. What an amazing witness to the transformational power of the Gospel!

8. Name a person of another ethnicity, nationality, or skin color at church, work, school, or in your neighborhood with whom you would like to reach across the divide and form a relationship.
9. What have you heard about this person—or what do you already know? What common ground might you have in common?
10. Why is it important to not cling too tightly to impressions you have formed about this person before you have gotten the chance to sit down and get to know him or her?

We often form false impressions about people that turn out to be entirely untrue when we sit down and get to know them. This is especially the case with people who have skin of a different color than us. You can share an example of someone you had false impressions about and ask your group for other examples. This is a great way of reinforcing the idea of the Eighth Commandment—not prejudging others but interpreting everything they say and do in the kindest way.

What Does This Mean?

Ask our Lord to help you analyze the way you approach other people, including your friends and family. Ask God to make you more like Jesus – more humble, more focused on other people’s needs and desires than your own. Pick one of the five elements of healthy relationships above and focus on improving your relationship skills in that area as you interact with others.

Wrapping Things Up

It would have been easy for Jesus to ignore the woman who came to the well, or to give her a polite smile and say, “Hi, how are you doing?” hoping she wouldn’t really tell Him. But He took the time, the effort, and the risk – and their shared reward was a new relationship of faith and trust and a woman who was transformed; freed from shame, guilt, and fear; and bold to share her Savior friend with her neighbors.

As the children of God, never give up or get discouraged with the relationships between blacks and whites, because we already know the power of the almighty God. Jesus has transformed us through “living water,” just as He transformed the Samaritan woman. He forgave our sins, turned us to a new life, and set us free from our shame, our guilt, and our fear. Remember, He said, “The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). Now you have that living water to offer to hurting people. Jesus can work through us to change this racially divided culture, rewrite the hateful speech and dialogue, and heal the racial division one person at a time. Once again, Jesus can use His disciples to literally change the world!