

If one person sharpens another, then community and friendship are vital to our growth as Christians. Most people would agree that this is the case, and yet, most people would also admit that they do not prioritize relationships as they should. What are the major obstacles to spending more time with others and placing our relationships in their proper place on our list of priorities? How do we take advantage of the built in sharpening process that God has made for us as we live in community? Let's spend some time this week working through those obstacles to our growth in community.

Day 1

Time

The first obstacle most of us face is time. God has given all of us 24 hours in a day, and for the vast majority of us it does not seem to be enough to meet all of our obligations. It is probably not controversial to say that living the Christian life well, being an effective disciple of Christ's, is difficult without prioritizing relationships. For the first century followers of Jesus, it is hard to imagine them struggling to find time to fit others into their schedules. We might observe that they lived a much simpler life, and that they didn't have all of the commitments that we do. On closer inspection, however, this might not be as obvious as we think. Yes, we have more distractions and complications in our lives, but do we actually have more time-consuming obligations? In the first century, work was a sun-up to sun-down endeavor that was laborious and went on six days a week. In addition, chores like cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry were much more difficult and time consuming. There was no indoor plumbing, so all water had to be carried from the nearest source. Almost everything they did was more difficult, and the days were shorter due to the lack of cheap and dependable light. We might actually have more time than we think, and if we start scheduling more time with friends, we might find that there is still enough time to get things done.

Verses: Ephesians 5:15-21, James 4:13-15, Colossians 4:5-6

Prayer Topics: Priorities, Wisdom, Willingness

Day 2

Rejection

One major hurdle to spending more time with others is the fear of rejection. By the time we head off to our first day of school, most of us have started to become aware that we are not always liked by others. It seems strange that there was a time that we were unaware of this truth, but now that we are aware, it can haunt our interactions with others as we constantly scrutinize them wondering if others have a positive impression of us or are just too polite to say anything. The fear of rejection can even haunt our familial relationships, as we hold ourselves at a distance to those who are supposed to be closest to us. The way to deal with the fear of rejection, like most fears, is to embrace it. If others don't like you, what is the worst that can happen? We let our fear of rejection make us pre-reject ourselves before others even have the chance to see if they like our company. Most of the time, social fears are the result of too great a focus on ourselves, and not enough consideration for other people. If we spent more time thinking about the other person, we would have less time to indulge our fears, and we would have the benefit of coming across to them as a more considerate person, because we would be. If you find yourself having anxiety over the fear of rejection, make it a mental habit to start really paying attention to the other people who are around you. Really listen to what they say, pay attention to their mannerisms and body language, and try to empathize with the emotions they are experiencing. Think about how you can make your interaction with them a positive experience, and you will usually find that the fear of rejection will go away.

Verses: Romans 8:31, Luke 6:22-23, 1 Corinthians 2:14

Prayer Topics: Courage, Maturity, Humility

Day 3

Vulnerability

In the garden, Adam and Eve put on fig leaves to hide their inadequacy when God came looking for them in the cool of the day. To this very day, we all put on fig leaves as we interact with those around us. These fig leaves are cover for all of our faults and flaws, all of our imperfections and sins, all of our weakness, uncertainty, and fear. These fig leaves provide a way for us to move through the world with a feeling of protection, but they also have a down side, which is that they keep us from having deep relationships with others. You only really know a person when you see past all of the defenses that they put up, and with many people that never happens. Having said this, there is also a thing called over-sharing, and that is something to be avoided as well. Strangely, the over-sharer and the defensive person both have the same problem, they just deal with it in different ways. In order to minimize the impact of our inadequacy, the over-sharer pretends that the problems of their life are not that big a deal by making them public to everyone. With the over-sharer, you never really have a relationship with them because a confession to them is the same as a handshake to everyone else, so it is not possible to get to know them any better than anyone else does. With the defensive person, they try to keep all that is undesirable in their life hidden away, never to see the light of day. This fear of vulnerability that the defensive person and the over-sharer have becomes a burden to both of them, as they never can find the deep and meaningful relationships that produce growth and character. Learn to share your weaknesses when the circumstances are appropriate, and find that strength can be made perfect in weakness.

Verses: James 5:16, 2 Corinthians 6:11-13, Galatians 6:2

Prayer Topics: Sincerity, Trust, Goodwill

Day 4

Skills

Napoleon Dynamite famously said that girls like guys that have skills, and he was right. The truth is, people like people with skills. The most important skills are people skills, as it opens up the world to you and keeps you sane and growing. If you didn't learn any relational skills when you were younger, it is hard to learn them when you are older, but not impossible. Just like we can learn to be more polite in our table manners and general behavior towards others, we can also learn important relational skills if we are willing to spend the time to do so. The most important part of learning any relational skill is that the experience of the other person must be important to you. You must stop thinking so much about what you want to get out of an interaction or relationship, and start seeing what the other person wants and needs. You must realize that any relationship involves an exchange, and that exchange can be fruitful and pleasant, or it can be useless and uncomfortable. The question is not about your experience but the other person's. Do you pay enough attention to the other person to pick up on the clues about whether they are finding their time with you to be productive and enjoyable? The starting place for all social skills is to develop a genuine love for others, because that will create in you the desire to put in the effort to gain the skills you lack. Do this, and your relationships will become rewarding for you and for them.

Verses: Proverbs 27:17, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Matthew 7:12

Prayer Topics: Confidence, Charisma, Character

Day 5

Laziness

The biggest obstacle we face in spending more time with others is laziness. It is just easier to be alone. The problem is, this brings about hell. In C. S. Lewis' book, *The Great Divorce*, those that have been sent to hell are constantly moving farther and farther from each other because they don't like each other. They never seem to think about putting in the effort to be more likable, they just move on. While we cannot do that because we have physical houses here, while they have spiritual houses there, we can do something similar by just keeping to ourselves. It takes effort to get cleaned up and presentable, it takes effort to have something to exchange, and it takes effort to deal with my rough edges and treat the other person well. I might have to make a meal, or pay for one. I might have to get out of the bad mood I am currently in. I might have to deal with the other person's rough edges when I don't really want to. It's easy to see why one person sharpens another, for just in this list of things we must do to spend time with others we are becoming a better person just to go out of the house to see someone else. This takes work, but the reward of glory is worth it. Do what you need to do to conquer the laziness in your life, before it conquers you.

Verses: Proverbs 13:4, 2 Thessalonians 3:10, 2 Thessalonians 3:11-12

Prayer Topics: Action, Motivation, Diligence