

Acts 16:1-5

March 15, 2020

1 Timothy 1:1-4, 18-19

[Exodus 18:13, 17-21]

Providential Relationships

Five Things God Uses to Grow Our Faith

This is the third Sunday in Lent and the third week that our small groups are learning and reflecting on the “Five Things God Uses to Grow Your Faith.” Andy Stanley’s videos and little study book is our resource for our small group meetings and provides the themes for these Sunday messages.

Big Faith

The first Sunday (two weeks ago) I spoke about big faith. Jesus said to His disciples, ... *Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you,* Matt. 17:20. That’s big faith! Then I talked about some of the mountains people face in life ... maybe some mountain you’re facing right now. You can’t get over it, or under it, or around it, and it seems impossible to get past it. Jesus tells us that God specializes in the impossible; taking what seems impossible for us to deal with and making something good happen, removing that mountain in the process. God can take our messes and make messages out of them.

The most important dimension of big faith is our relationship with God. It’s got to be genuine. Religiosity is no substitute for genuine faith in God. The faith Jesus invites us into is to trust God enough to do what He asks. So, if we confess to have mountain-moving faith, we should get a shovel and a wheelbarrow and start moving rocks. This leads us right into the second week’s theme:

Practical Teaching

One of the ways that our faith can be built up is through practical teaching. For many of us the Bible can be confusing and difficult to understand. But being exposed to teaching that makes the Bible meaningful, practical, and applicable to everyday life makes all the difference. Maybe you’ve read some parts of the Bible numerous times, then suddenly it makes sense because you’ve seen what it means in today’s terms. When we see how our story connects with the stories of the people in the Bible we’re more likely to put it into practice. Jesus said: *Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock...* Matt. 7:24. He means for us to put His words into practice.

If we want your faith in God to show up when you go through the storms of life, if you want to see God at work, then you must do and not just hear whatever Jesus tells you. *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.* James 1:22.

Taking steps toward fulfilling God's directions brings God into your life in a powerful way and then your eyes and understanding start to open up. That's what grows big faith!

Providential Relationships

Many years ago I had a mentor named George, a retired Methodist pastor. He gave me some very good advice. "Richard" he said, "choose your friends carefully, because in time you will become like them." That advice has stuck with me for over 40 years. In your small group this week you heard Andy Stanley say: "Your friends determine the direction and quality of your life." Some folks get married without really thinking that they are choosing their spouse to be the single greatest influencer in their life.

It is often in adolescence through young adulthood that people form their patterns for living, and if they do not lay down godly principles they can easily end up in a bad place. One of those patterns is who you hang around with ... who do you choose for friends? Who do you spend time with? God uses human relationships to grow our faith in Him. It is also true that there are people who will undermine your faith in God. They aren't God's instruments, rather they are instruments of someone else. St. Paul warned the Christians at Corinth, *Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character,"* 1 Cor. 15:33.

Are there regrets in your life? I have some. I imagine you do too. How many of them can be traced back to a relationship? Relationships are powerful things, that intersect with our faith for good or ill. If we're not consciously choosing our relationships, we are at the mercy of whoever we're spending time with. Proverbs 13:20 says: *Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.*

The disciples of Jesus were especially fortunate for He chose them. They learned the most from just being in His company for a great deal of time. They observed and absorbed how he interacted with people, with them, in addition to what he taught. Quality time with good friends is helpful, but sometimes you learn a lot more through quantity time.

Your Providential Relationships

Who is that someone who God used to bring you closer to Himself? Who is that someone that inspired and encouraged your faith? Was there someone in your life who helped your faith in God get bigger? Think of someone ... preferably not a family member. When you identify those people, give thanks to God.

Maybe you're sitting there thinking, I don't want to think about that ... I'm just here because I'm curious, not sure I even have faith in God, not sure I believe the Bible is true, I don't usually go to church. That's okay, because you're surrounded by folks who didn't use to go to church. My mentor, who I mentioned earlier, said a couple of other things that have stuck with me: "Richard," he said, "I hope you go into local church ministry because it's a great mission field." Then he said, "Remember, Christians have always been a minority; even in the church."

Considered the greatest of the prophets, Moses benefited from providential relationships. When God called him to lead the Israelites Moses had an excuse: I can't speak in public. God replied: *What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you, and he will be glad to see you,* Exodus 4:14. Your excuses don't work with God! Later Moses found himself near burn out in settling all the disputes among the Israelites as they traversed through the desert. God sent Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, who said to Moses: *What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone.... select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens,* Exodus 18:17-18, 21. God doesn't expect you to carry out His plans all by yourself. Let Him provide you with help.

Paul became the greatest evangelist for the gospel, even surpassing Peter and James and John in establishing new churches. He was on fire for the forgiveness he had found in Jesus Christ! Traveling in Asia Minor he met a young man (as recorded in the book of Acts, the first church history): *... he came also to Derbe and to Lystra: and behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewess that believed; but his father was a Greek,* Acts 16:1. Paul's meeting Timothy was providential. Paul became mentor to Timothy who became Paul's helper, then co-worker, and finally a leader in his own right.

Timothy traveled with Paul, learned in his company, and was equipped to serve God. Paul wrote: But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel, Phil. 2:22. Paul introduces Timothy as though an equal: *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,* Col. 1:1. In other letters he calls Timothy his co-worker. Then he commissions Timothy to go out as a leader of newly established Christian congregations saying, *Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well, holding on to faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith.* 1 Tim. 1:18-19.

Who in your life has caused you to have a renewed interest in faith or become curious about faith in God? Who was there to encourage you, mentor

you, lead you into knowing God and growing in faith as a disciple of Jesus? I was very fortunate in my upbringing – my parents always attended church and made sure we did as well (though there were times I didn't want to go). But my faith in God might not have grown to much if it had not been for providential Sunday school teachers at certain times. As a fifth-grader I was losing interest in church, and God and Jesus and all that stuff, but my Sunday school teacher was man who took an interest in me and the other kids. He was an executive for some large company in the area and every Sunday he came prepared with Bible lessons for us. I cannot recall any of the lessons, nor do I remember the teacher's name, but I do remember him. Likewise, in high school another male Sunday school teacher kept me on track. He was interested in us, what we were doing, even as he planted seeds of faith in us. I don't recall the lessons or his name, but God put him there to make a difference in my life.

I just finished reading *My Grandfather's Son*, the memoir of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. His grandfather was one of those providential relationships in his life who laid the foundation for responsible character and the religious faith that brought Clarence back from his wayward years as a young adult.

To Serve and To Be Served

God wants your faith in Him to grow bigger ... your life will be better when that happens. God also sends people into your life to encourage your faith. Are there people you could get around who will help you grow in your trust of God? Our culture will not help you find those people or learn from them ... quite the opposite. Our culture, like our own human nature, will always cause us to drift away from God. Rarely are we tempted to do the right thing.

It's imperative to seek out opportunities to be around people who have faith in God ... and that means they don't just talk a good God-talk line, but truly live it out. There are things we can do to work with our heavenly Father to recognize and develop relationships with people of faith. God always answers prayers in line with His purposes. So, pray for faithful mentors and friends. We can be intentional about placing ourselves among people who can help grow our faith.

That's why I keep pleading with people to get into one of our small discipleship groups – where you give God a chance to providentially speak into your life through others. If you have children you need to get them into children's church where another adult can speak into their lives, bringing God's word into their development. You will appreciate it greatly. Don't wait until they're older. If you wait until later elementary, junior high, or high school it's too late baby, it's too late. When I pray for others, I often pray that God will bring someone into their lives who can encourage them or lead them into a greater faith.

Sometimes God will call on you to be that person to encourage another in the faith. As your faith in God grows you too will become an encourager or mentor to someone. You're always a witness to God's work in your life with your spouse, your kids, co-workers, neighbors, friends. Don't be scared off by awkward moments. You see someone who's life is in trouble or messed up but you're afraid to say a word. Pray that God will put you out there. Tell God you're available even if you're not sure. Maybe that was the way for you: someone spoke to you and it was awkward, but now you look back and thank God for that providential moment that started you on the path of faith in God.

Great is His faithfulness and God wants ours to be great. Cooperate with His purposes by seeking good company and making yourself available to God as his instrument. If God wants to use you to reach someone don't give up. Harry, our neighbor across the street ... became acquainted, after a while he began to open up about personal struggles. I eventually invited him to church ... 5 times! I didn't give up. He's still a member of that church and in fact is one of the leaders. Trust God.

Don't be afraid for *He is ... able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us...* Ephesians 3:20.

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Take Away

God uses human relationships to grow our faith in Him.

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