

THE INTENTIONAL YEAR



simple rhythms for finding
freedom, peace, and purpose

HOLLY + GLENN PACKIAM

foreword by Rich Villodas

This book helped me rethink our family's plans for next week and for next year. If you feel like your stress, busyness, and distraction are sapping healthy rhythms from your life, Glenn and Holly Packiam are welcome and practical guides. You won't feel like you are reading about something ideal but unattainable. This is a book for real people, and the steps shown here can lead us to better lives.

RUSSELL MOORE, public theologian at *Christianity Today* and director of *Christianity Today's* Public Theology Project

The best part of this book is that a wife and husband are literally on the same page, in pursuit of God-honoring intentionality in their personal, marriage, family, and ministry lives. I love how Glenn and Holly weave their personal story into their desire for abundantly intentional years together. A richly spiritual, warmly relational, and vibrantly practical resource.

STEPHEN A. MACCHIA, founder and president of Leadership Transformations, director of the Pierce Center for Disciple-Building at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and author of *The Discerning Life*

Glenn and Holly Packiam have crafted a book that's about so much more than just setting goals—they're showing us God's invitation to abundance through living with intentionality toward Jesus. What does it mean to create rhythms of renewal, rest, and refreshment in this hurried day and age? The Packiams answer that question beautifully with pastoral guidance and practical wisdom.

AUBREY SAMPSON, pastor, speaker, and author of *Known*

The breakneck pace of life in the modern world is leaving many of us exhausted and at a loss. In *The Intentional Year*, Glenn and Holly Packiam invite us to take a deep breath and settle ourselves amid the mad rush of a culture moving with far too much speed and far too little intention. Pastorally warm, theologically rich, and practically accessible, this book is a wonderful guide down a new path, toward the freedom, peace, and purpose every human truly longs for.

JAY Y. KIM, pastor of Westgate Church and author of *Analog Christian*

What a beautiful and life-giving book from Glenn and Holly. Together they have cultivated a life of purpose and significance through their intentional practices, and now they've invited us to make those our own. Our intentions embody our values. Whether you're an expert at intentions or are just starting down the path, Glenn and Holly have invited us into rhythms that are both simple and profound.

TRICIA LOTT WILLIFORD, author of *This Book Is for You* and *You Can Do This*

Our world is full of chaos and disorder, but our daily lives can be different. Glenn and Holly have lived intentional lives, full of healthy habits and rhythms, and now we get to glean from their years of learning. You will find strength, wisdom, and encouragement on each of these pages.

BRADY BOYD, senior pastor of New Life Church and author of *Addicted to Busy*

We live in a busy world in which too many of us don't take the time to stop and reflect on what is happening in our lives, our families, and our world. This often results in stress, anxiety, and burnout. One of the ways we can guard our souls from spiritual burnout is by rediscovering the ancient rhythms of grace that are deeply rooted in the historic Christian faith. In *The Intentional Year*, Glenn and Holly Packiam invite us to slow down, take an inventory of our lives, and cultivate daily rhythms of prayer, rest, renewal, and work. This book provides a road map for how we can develop spiritual rhythms that have the power to transform us from the inside out and make us increasingly like Jesus Christ.

DR. WINFIELD BEVINS, author of *Liturgical Mission*

When my wife, Rochelle, and I started taking three days at the end of every year to reflect, celebrate, and plan, it took our relationship with each other—and with God—to another level. Even at that, *The Intentional Year* takes it another step forward. Glenn and Holly unpack how to use and leverage your and your partner's gifts and callings to bring light and goodness to a world immersed in darkness. Every couple needs that. You can't imagine how you will be blessed.

SEAN ISAAC PALMER, author of *Speaking by the Numbers*

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*To our parents, Bill and Roxanne and David and Karmen,
for all the big and small ways you intentionally love us.*

CONTENTS

Foreword by Rich Villodas *xi*

Chapter 1 The Spirituality of Intentionality *1*

PART 1 REFLECTION:

Looking Back and Looking Forward *25*

Chapter 2 Reflecting on the Past *27*

Chapter 3 A Word for the Year *45*

PART 2 INVENTORY:

Examining Five Spheres of Life *63*

Chapter 4 Practices of Prayer *65*

Chapter 5 The Power of Rest *83*

Chapter 6 Pathways of Renewal *97*

Chapter 7 Circles of Relationship *113*

Chapter 8 Habits of Work *133*

PART 3 ACTION:

Making It Stick *153*

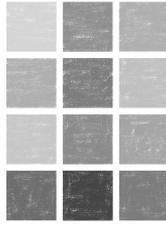
Chapter 9 Rhythms of Intentionality *155*

Chapter 10 Calendar Rules *183*

Epilogue *193*

Acknowledgments *197*

Notes *201*



CHAPTER 7

CIRCLES OF RELATIONSHIP

Only those do we call friends to whom we can fearlessly entrust our heart and all its secrets; those, too, who, in turn, are bound to us by the same law of faith and security.

Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*

GLENN

I sat there, stumped. *What rhythms do I have in my life with friends?* My mind was drawing a blank. While Holly wrote on her worksheet, and dozens of others in the room did the same, I was stunned by my inability to think of where regular time with friends happened in my life.

Sure, there were birthday dinners and occasional get-togethers in each other's homes, but a regular time with friends? I didn't have that.

The longer I sat there unable to complete my worksheet,

the more it dawned on me that I didn't think I *could* have scheduled time with friends. I'm a pastor, after all. I have to be available to people who need me; I have to respond when people ask to meet. And if I'm being proactive, my energy should be directed toward reaching out to key leaders, pillars in our church community, or new believers I want to disciple. I had made a list of older men I wanted to learn from and had been meeting with them with some sort of regularity. But planned, regular time with friends? That wasn't something I thought I could or should have.

Holly and I were attending a conference in Queens, New York, and the worksheet we were filling out was a "rule of life" (we'll unpack this concept in chapter 9). The chart had four squares labeled "prayer," "rest," "relationships," and "work." I had plenty of practices to write down under the sphere of "work," and even under "prayer" and "rest." But the "relationships" box had me stumped. With such a busy life and barely enough in the tank for Holly and our children, I wondered how it was even possible to have deep friendships.

Maybe you've wondered the same thing. Your job is demanding. You feel like your time is already stretched to a breaking point. How, in the midst of all you have going on, can you carve out regular time for friendships?

WHAT IS A FRIEND?

HOLLY

It seems like an elementary question. *Everyone* knows what a friend is. A friend is someone you can count on, open

up to, share your life with, make memories with, and more. C. S. Lewis described friendship love as being *about* something. It takes a “shoulder to shoulder” posture, with a “common quest or vision” uniting people and serving as “the very medium in which their mutual love and knowledge exist.”¹

But there can be another layer of friendship where the shared bond is an attentiveness to the Spirit’s work in each other’s lives. As wonderful as it is to have a friend with whom we have a connection or share similar interests, spiritual friends help us pay attention to what God is doing in our lives. Mindy Caliguire made this observation in her book *Spiritual Friendship*:

When members of the body are meaningfully connected to each other, they feel each other’s pain, and they sense each other’s joy. And when they are open to it, in a mystical way that is deeply embedded in ordinary human conversation and circumstances, the Spirit of God has unchecked exposure to the soul of each.²

When a friend of mine asked if I’d be interested in joining a spiritual-friendship group with her and another friend, I was intrigued. I’d longed for many years to meet with friends more consistently, but it seemed challenging to get something on the calendar and stick to it.

“Tell me more,” I said.

“Let’s meet once a week with the intention of listening to

one another share about how it is with our souls, praying together, sitting together in silence, and reading a portion of Scripture together,” she replied.

It sounded like refreshment to my soul. I said yes.

I’ve always been intentional about initiating time with friends, but getting up every Friday morning at six thirty for a spiritual-friendship meeting was a new discipline. I’m generally open and honest with friends, but the habit of meeting weekly with this group of friends challenged me to a new and deeper level of authenticity. When I met with someone once a month or every two months, I would tend to give an overview of what had been happening in my life, which is necessary when you’re trying to catch someone up. But I noticed that when I met with the spiritual-friendship group, there would often be something more immediate to share—a challenge or celebration. What a joy it was to have these friends as a holy witness to my life in the valleys and on the mountaintops. Sometimes structure in a friendship group feels like it might inhibit connection, but I loved knowing that every week we would have a deep and meaningful spiritual connection because our meetings had a flow, or rhythm. I’m forever grateful for the three years I spent meeting weekly with these dear friends.

Not every friendship has to be a spiritual friendship for us to have deep connections. There are lots of creative ways to have meaningful conversations. In this season, I’m meeting with a couple of friends every other week. Sometimes we read a book that challenges our thinking, and we discuss the ideas.

Other times we share a “soul question” or two ahead of time and come to the group knowing what we’ll share. Author and psychiatrist Curt Thompson has four questions he encourages friends to dialogue with each other about:

1. What are you anxious about?
2. What are you ashamed of?
3. What do you want? What are you longing for?
4. What is the next thing you want to create with the Lord?³

There are, of course, many more questions to ask, including these:

1. What is the Lord inviting you to say yes to in this season?
2. What are you holding before the Lord with anxiety or fear?
3. What is God asking you to let go of?

Glenn grew up with no brothers, but the Lord always seemed to provide them for him through the church. From his youth-group days to his current ministry, he has found friends who stick closer than brothers. I was always surrounded by friends in my high school years, but I learned to find the right ones in college, the ones who would challenge me and draw out the best in me. Now that Glenn and I are both in church ministry, we’ve found it difficult to

have relationships that are truly mutual rather than one-way, “asymmetrical,” or where one of us is the boss, overseer, or pastor. Yet as we work on our emotional and relational health and are intentional in cultivating the right relationships in the right seasons, our friendships have become richer.

THE SPACE BETWEEN

What does it take to have healthy relationships? There is always an unseen and unspoken space between two people. Sometimes it’s hesitancy or nervousness. Sometimes it’s pain from a previous wound. Sometimes it’s bad habits of relating or communication patterns that are destructive or dysfunctional. It could be comparison or competition, feelings of shame or rejection. It could be fear of disappointment. Closing the gap between two lives requires paying attention to our own hearts, moving toward each other, being secure in who we are, and appreciating our similarities and differences. In other words, it takes self-awareness, empathy, and differentiation.

Self-Awareness

Growing up, I didn’t talk much about my emotions; my style of speaking was mostly narrative. If you asked me how my day was, I would give you the rundown of where I went, who I saw, what the weather was like, and so on. But throughout my undergraduate and graduate education, I was exposed to different ideas about how people process emotions—and how many of us don’t actually process them at all but sweep

them under the rug instead. I didn't intentionally stuff my emotions, but I didn't know how to intentionally access them on a regular basis either.

Over the course of many years, I've been exposed to psychologists and counselors and pastors who've helped me understand self-awareness as the ability to recognize our emotions and thought processes and how they affect others. Many of us believe we're self-aware, but often we don't take the time to process our emotions and look at parts of ourselves that might cause us to feel ashamed.

There are many assessment tools—from the Myers-Briggs personality inventory to the Enneagram—that can help us become aware not only of our emotions but also of our preferences and motivations. In fact, I suspect that one of the reasons the Enneagram has become so popular is that it gives us a language we can use to explain why we do the things we do. It leads us on a journey of self-discovery. Glenn is fond of saying that even if the Enneagram is not *ontologically true* (i.e., it doesn't make a definitive statement about the reality of who we are), it is *existentially helpful* (i.e., the experience of exploring which number we identify with is useful in learning about ourselves).

Pete Scazzero, in his Emotionally Healthy Discipleship Course, has popularized a tool from family systems theory called a *genogram* that guides you in mapping out your family tree and outlining key events that shaped your family. One of the goals of tracing the contours of our individual stories is to recognize the scripts we tend to live out. For example,

because of my family story, I tended to internalize the script that I needed to stay steady and not show too much emotion.

No matter which self-awareness tools you use, the work of becoming self-aware is a precursor to healthy relationships. It's challenging to have healthy relationships with those who aren't willing or don't have the skills to honestly look at themselves. Our expectations of relationships will vary depending on whether the people in our lives are pursuing self-awareness and emotional health. But even if they aren't, we can always do the work to better prepare ourselves for healthy relationships.

QUESTIONS TO PROMOTE SELF-AWARENESS

Journal your responses to these questions or verbally process with someone.

- What are you angry about?
- What are you sad about?
- What are you happy about?
- What are you anxious about?



Empathy

Empathy is the ability to walk in another person's shoes—to share what someone else is feeling or experiencing. I've had the privilege of walking alongside many people through situations I've never encountered. Yes, I can't truly understand

what it's like to grow up in an abusive home or to lose a child to cancer or to be cut off from my extended family. And yet I can offer empathy. I know what it's like to feel anger when I've been blocked from something I hoped for. I know what it's like to feel sadness when a relationship is broken, with little to no hope of repair. I believe it's possible for us to tap into our own stories to enter into the difficult feelings of others.

Empathizing with others comes naturally for some of us; we easily feel what they feel. Others may want to empathize but have a difficult time stepping into someone else's situation, especially without a frame of reference. If you identify with struggling to empathize, try being curious about someone else's situation. Ask questions that can help you see things from their perspective. Offer a nonjudgmental presence. You might be surprised at how even little steps in another's direction will foster a connection.

Differentiation

One of the most powerful concepts that has helped me understand myself is differentiation, a term coined by Dr. Murray Bowen, who developed the Bowen family systems theory. Differentiation is the ability to have and state my own values and opinions while still remaining connected to others relationally. In the middle of the spectrum is healthy differentiation from others, and at either end is an unhealthy style of relating. On one end is being *enmeshed* with family members or other people in our lives. Examples of enmeshment include identifying with our families of origin to the

point of not feeling acceptable to them if we live in another town, choose a different career path from the one our parents wanted for us, affiliate with a different political party, or choose not to come to a Christmas gathering. On the other end of the spectrum is being *detached* from our families or other people. Detachment means being so disconnected from others that they no longer affect us. Let's say that your mom expresses anxiety about your moving overseas. If you're detached, you probably couldn't care less about how she feels. You're going to do what you want, no matter what anyone says.

The goal is to work toward differentiation. We'll never be fully differentiated, but we can pursue healthy relationships with others by learning to express our own values and opinions and respect differences.

QUESTIONS TO DISCERN WHERE YOU ARE ON THE DIFFERENTIATION SPECTRUM

- Can I remain myself as I move toward another person to understand their perspective and emotions?
- Can I allow another person's experience of a situation to move me but not diminish my own experience of that situation?
- Do I allow myself to think or feel differently about things than the people I'm close to?



TRUST, TENSION, AND TRUE INTIMACY

GLENN

It's been said that trust is the result of a risk survived.

One of the biggest traps in any relationship is rushing to resolve a conflict and missing the opportunity for intimacy. When we experience frustration, there is usually a longing, a fear, a sadness, or a pain animating it deep beneath the surface. Ideally we would, in the course of growing in self-awareness and relational health, be able to name these deeper feelings and share them with our friends or our spouses. But more often than not, we don't realize what's there until it gets poked—like a dog sleeping under the coffee table.

Early in our marriage, I would want to talk about an issue in the moment, even if it meant staying up way too late. Holly was smart enough to know that if we kept going, tiredness and anger would get the best of us. I finally learned to trust the strength of her love and commitment to return to the matter the next day. The benefit of hitting the pause button was that it gave me a chance to pray about the issue and listen to the Holy Spirit as he searched my heart and uncovered the deeper longing, fear, sadness, or pain. When we returned to the conversation, I was better able to say why the issue mattered to me and how her words or actions were affecting me. We were able to work our way toward a resolution—such as an apology, a new course of action, or a different system for meal planning or putting the kids to bed—but more importantly, we gained real intimacy.

You see, we each have a deep treasure chest of longings

and fears and sorrows and pain, and these manifest themselves as expectations, often subconscious ones. A husband's fear of abandonment might lead to the expectation that his wife should always reply to his texts or take his calls when he is away on a trip. A friend's prior pain of exclusion—perhaps from high school or college—might lead to expecting an invitation anytime a group of friends gets together. A mother's sorrow over knowing that her teenager will be leaving home soon may lead to the expectation that her son shouldn't rush off to his room after dinner. And on it goes.

Once an expectation takes shape in our minds, there are really only two options for what will happen—it will be met or it won't. But here's the funny thing about expectations: When they're met, the person on the other end gets nothing. I mean, it's like paying a bill; we're just paying what we owe. No one gets a thank-you card from their cell-phone company for sending in their payment. So when a friend or a spouse, a parent or a child does what you expect them to do, it doesn't even register on your radar, does it?

But when they don't? Uh-oh. That's when you know. The little irritation you feel that leaks out in a sideways comment or a sarcastic remark, the moody silence you slip into, the temptation to “ghost” them on the text thread—all are dashboard indicators that something is sparking beneath the surface.

But there's hope. You can work your way backward and search your soul with the Spirit's help. Pray Psalm 139: “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious

thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (verses 23-24, NIV). Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal not just any “offensive way” in you but also any hidden reasons for your reaction to an unmet expectation. Then express what the Spirit shows you to the person you’re in relationship with. (Holly might say, “I think I get irritated when you turn the TV on to check the score because I long for the kind of home where we’re present to each other.”)

The next risky step to take is turning that longing, fear, sadness, or pain into a request.

“Would it be okay if . . . ?”

“Could we find another way to . . . ?”

“Is there a possibility you might . . . ?”

Requests are the proof of a relationship. When the psalmists brought their petitions to God, they were revealing their confidence in the character of God and the covenant he made with them. Bound up in the act of asking is the belief that God is sovereign and good, and that he is *their* God. A similar thing happens when you’re intentional about making a request. Asking demonstrates confidence in the relationship, trust in the other person’s character, and a belief that they care about you.

This opens the door to some very different possible outcomes. If the person says yes to your request, then you can express gratitude. (Contrast this with the sense that a met expectation is merely fulfilling an obligation.) If the person says no or that they would love to say yes but feel unable to, then you can return to God as your ultimate source. And if

they say yes but struggle to come through, well, that's just an opportunity to take up your cross and deny yourself. I say this a bit tongue in cheek, but it really is important not to put the cross at the beginning of the process by thinking that denying yourself means never allowing the Spirit to search your heart and mine out your longings, fears, sorrows, and pain. That work is essential to becoming a good friend and cultivating healthy relationships.

Each step requires intentionality. Intimacy always does.

Of course, we can't do this much work in every relationship. As much as we would like to, we can't give equal time and attention to all the relationships in our lives. Each of us has a limited relational capacity—which is why we need to be intentional about which relationships to invest in during a given season or year.

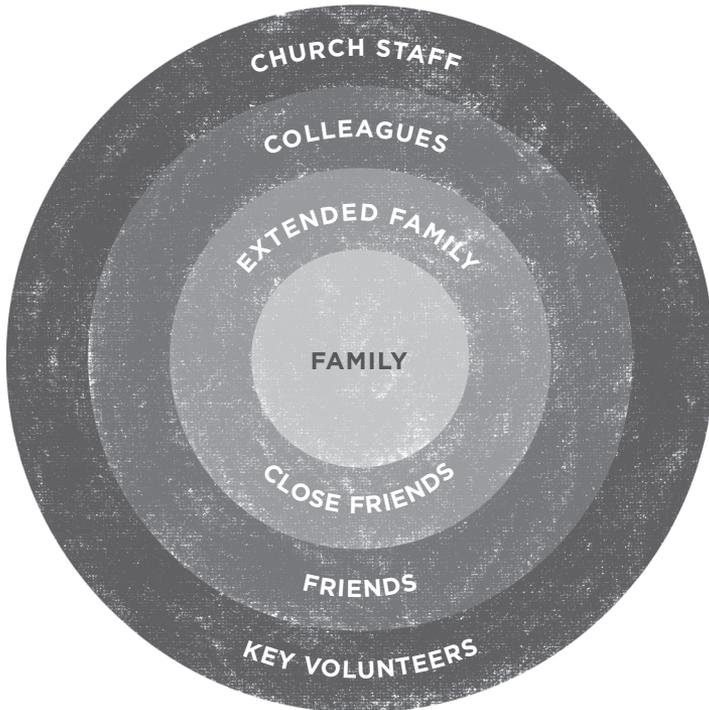
CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

How do we know which relationships to prioritize? What would that even look like?

That day in Queens when I couldn't complete the worksheet question about regular time with friends, I realized I had been passive about my relationships. I would respond only when people emailed me to request a meeting or invited our family over to dinner. As a bit of an introvert, when I hit days off, I wanted to crawl under a blanket and read for an hour.

When Holly and I started doing our retreat each year, we began to incorporate a time of praying and talking about which relationships the Lord might be leading us to invest in

more. To help us identify these investments, we look at our relationships in terms of concentric circles of increasing size.



The smallest circle in the center represents family, and the next circle usually represents extended family and close friends. As we move farther out from the center, another circle is for friends and colleagues (though there is some overlap with the close-friends circle). Next is a circle for staff or key volunteers in the church. To be clear, we're talking here about relational investment outside our nine-to-five workdays and

ministries, not about the people we have appointments with during the day, anyone from the church who needs help, and those we're discipling on a regular basis.

Once we've sketched out these circles, we then discuss ways we can connect with the people in our lives. Connecting includes things like dates with each other, one-on-one time with the kids, monthly meal groups, quarterly retreat days with friends, overnights with each other, vacations with the family, and more.

It's easy to feel guilty about categorizing relationships in this way. But keep in mind that even Jesus had three disciples who were closest to him, twelve who went everywhere with him, and larger groups who followed him around—not to mention crowds of people he taught, fed, and healed. Paul had relationships that were life-giving to him as well. The names he often included near the end of his letters—you know, the lists we tend to skip!—give us a glimpse of the people in his life. There are no lone rangers for God. And there is no evenhanded way to be there for everyone. In fact, trying to do so ultimately leaves us absent from everyone.

It's also helpful to remember that the whole point of praying through our relational investments once or twice a year is that there are different seasons for cultivating or investing in different relationships.

Holly and I have been blessed to live and work with friends we've known for more than twenty years. This is a gift not to be squandered. But it's hard to schedule time with everyone, especially having four kids who are all pretty active in dance,

musical theater, and sports. Most evenings we're just shuttling kids around for hours. Seriously. Not an exaggeration.

Since our time and energy are limited, we've found it helpful when praying about our relational investments to ask the Lord which relationships we should *lean into*, which we should *let lie*, and which we should *let go of*.

LEAN IN, LET LIE, LET GO

HOLLY

The relationships we choose to lean into are the ones that not only matter most—family and close friends—but also have time-bound priorities. For example, Glenn and I are mindful that our teenagers have only a few more years left in our home, so they're at the top of our list.

The relationships you decide to let lie aren't ones to ignore. Letting them lie simply means that if you get together with these people a handful of times a year, it would be just fine. They're important to you, but not your top priority.

The relationships you need to let go of are much harder to talk about. Often these relationships feel one-sided, where you're doing all the work and these friends don't seem to care. It's important, though, to talk about it before silently writing them off! You could say something like "Hey, I sometimes feel that you wouldn't care if I stopped initiating things with you. Is that an accurate picture?" I've learned this often surprises people. Not everyone is an initiator. If a friend indicates they would care, that's a sign they value the relationship. Sometimes all that is needed is a clarifying conversation.

The other “let go” relationships are unhealthy ones that drain you not because these people need something from you but because they don’t know how to give and receive love. Many of us are awkward in relationships. But some people are toxic. They’re constantly griping about other people, leaking out their pain and hurt, trying to build alliances and take sides, driving a wedge between a group of friends or even in the church. These are the relationships to let go of.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Who helps you pay attention to God’s work in your life?
- Which friends walk with you, challenge you, and encourage you? How can you make more room for them?
- How can you become a better friend or bridge the gap between you and someone you want a closer relationship with?
- Which relationships do you need to let go of or pull away from?
- Which relationships do you need to let lie for a season?
- Which relationships do you sense the Lord prompting you to lean into this year?
- What would it take to lean into these relationships?



Reflect on these questions to get a sense of the landscape of your relationships. It might be helpful to start by listing all the people in your life—from home to work to school to church and so on—and then group them in concentric circles. Think about what being intentional with the relationships in each circle might look like. It doesn't have to be hard. In fact, it's likely you already do many things to nurture these relationships. Being intentional about who we are, how we relate to others, and which relationships we lean into, let lie, and let go of is a natural part of cultivating friendships. So why wouldn't we reflect on these things? After all, relationships are the true riches of life.

GREENHOUSE OF GROWTH

GLENN

Throughout this book we've been talking about intentional practices that help us abide in Christ—not only to enhance our joyful union and intimacy with him, but also so that he can produce fruit in us for God's glory and for the sake of the world. Circles of relationship are certainly a key part of cultivating our relationship with the Lord, but they function in another way as well.

Relationships are a greenhouse for growth. In the context of intentional community, we have opportunities to cultivate and evaluate the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. Let me explain. Think of the fruit of *patience*. How do you know the Holy Spirit is producing patience in your life if you are never in situations that require it? When you live with

relational intentionality, you will have a mix of symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships. Some relationships will be mutual, and others will be more one-sided. If you're a parent, your relationships with your children may be intentional, but they will never be mutual. Ideally, parents love, give to, and serve their children more than their children could ever do in return. That's how it should be. But relationships that flow more in one direction tend to be costlier. And they require more patience.

Even among friends where relationships are mutual by definition, we need patience. And forgiveness. And gentleness. And faithfulness. This fruit develops only in the context of community. Relationships not only reveal our need for the fruit of the Spirit, but they also become an essential part of the ecosystem in which his fruit grows in our lives.

That's why being intentional with relationships matters so much. If you are *laissez-faire* in your relationships, thinking, *Whatever will be will be*, you will walk away when a relationship becomes strained or difficult. But that's often precisely the moment when the Holy Spirit wants to drive your roots deeper and push fruit outward in your life. Don't quit. You won't want to miss the moment or the fruit!