

leaders, you will search for me, but you can't come where I am going." 25 "So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other, just as I have loved you, you should love each other. 26 Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples."

"Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise. 27 Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. 28 And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near."

THE POWER OF TOGETHER

*Why Real
Relationships
Are Vital for
Spiritual
Growth*



JIM PUTMAN



Eugene Peterson once said, “It is hard being myself, by myself.” *Ubuntu* is a popular phrase in South Africa that means “We are, therefore I am.” Jim Putman gets this profound truth about our design by God as relational beings and provides a path for us to discover it with power in our “all about me” culture.

RANDY FRAZEE, lead pastor at Westside Family Church and author of *The Connecting Church 2.0*

Jim Putman helpfully shows us that the “Just Jesus and me” attitude of so many Christians is not only unbiblical but soul destroying and faith killing. Discipleship happens in relationships, period. As Jim points out, all the fruits of the Spirit are others-related. This book not only paints a positive, compelling vision for Christian community, it charts the way forward. Both pastors and dissatisfied Christians will find this book a refreshing, practical, and helpful read.

J. D. GREEAR, pastor of The Summit Church, founder of J. D. Greear Ministries, and author of *Stop Asking Jesus into Your Heart*

Jim is known for his commitment to Jesus’ relational method for discipling. But in this book, he challenges the definition of *spiritual maturity* most accepted in the American church. He asks and answers the question *What is spiritual maturity?* He makes the point that most Christians are not experiencing all that Jesus has for them, and the result is a faith that does not satisfy them, does not create stability in a shaky world, and does not attract the lost. This book gives everyone a better goal to shoot for and asks each of us questions that we need to answer about ourselves. Jim’s advice in this book can help you be all that Jesus desires you to be and help the church become a light in a dark world again.

JOSH MCDOWELL, author and speaker

Through humor, pain, life experience, and a biblical foundation, *The Power of Together* will raise your vision to new heights for the power of relationships in God's family. Jim Putman will inspire you to fight for authentic, life-giving, and soul-building relationships.

GENE APPEL, senior pastor of Eastside Christian Church

Jim Putman's *The Power of Together* touched me deeply. Most of the mistakes people make in attempting to be a disciple come from thinking that information is the key to transformation. No one believes more in the power of Scripture and is more faithful than Jim to preach it. But what the people from afar don't see is Jim's commitment to relationships and how powerful they are. This book plumbs the depth of the human soul in a simple, powerful way. You can't read this book without changing—I know it ministered deeply to me.

BILL HULL, author of *The Discipleship Gospel* and cofounder of The Bonhoeffer Project



THE POWER OF TOGETHER

*Why Real
Relationships
Are Vital for
Spiritual
Growth*

JIM PUTMAN

NavPress 

Published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers

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*To my parents,
Bill and Bobbi Putman,
who first showed me what discipleship and real relationship look like.*

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SOMETHING IS DEFINITELY MISSING

As a former high school and college wrestler, I can tell you that wrestlers must practice extreme discipline. One form this takes is with diet and water intake. Every day they keep one eye on the fridge and one on the scale. Back when I wrestled, we'd weigh in before every match, eat like crazy afterward to get strength to wrestle, and then begin dieting again to "make weight" for our wrestling classification the next day. Practices such as these can lead to an unhealthy view of food for the rest of a wrestler's life. (These days, most schools and wrestling programs have rules that make wrestling far healthier for those who participate.)

Since we didn't get to eat often when we wrestled, we developed the habit of being picky about food. When we did eat, it had to be food we really liked as well as substantial enough to get our bodies through the workouts. Why waste one of our few precious meals on food we didn't like? Once I tasted something I loved, I didn't care to try something new. I particularly loved lasagna—specifically, my mother's lasagna. She always made it from the same recipe, and it was always perfect.

I was still wrestling competitively when Lori and I got married in college. One morning when my wife asked what I wanted for dinner that night, I told her about my favorite dinner, lasagna. My new bride smiled and told me she would fix it for me. I was thrilled. I thought about the upcoming dinner all day.

Now, before I tell you what happened, please remember I was a new

husband and a brand-new believer with a lot to learn. I came home to a wonderful wife who had slaved in the kitchen for hours, sat down at the table she'd set, and forked up a big bite of lasagna. And I took a good hard look at it. It did not look the same as my mother's. I sniffed it. Nope. Didn't smell like my mother's either. Then I tasted it.

No, this was definitely not the right lasagna.

I even had the gall to say this to my wife. Lori's lasagna was fine, but it was not what I had expected. I hadn't yet learned how to fake liking something or how to be diplomatic. I tried to tell Lori that my mother was an expert lasagna maker, and I loved the precise way she cooked it. I tried to explain how anything less was just . . . *less*.

Fortunately, after she shed some tears, I realized I needed to clean up my relational mess. And my wife understood that when I said, "I like lasagna," I didn't mean just any old lasagna. I liked my mother's lasagna—only! Over the years, I have learned how to be a much more sensitive husband. And my wife has graciously repeated my mother's recipes, down to the last ingredient.

But—my relational missteps aside—we can learn something from all this talk about lasagna.

A plate of good lasagna is a picture of the way God intended us to live. God is the Master Designer and Expert Chef, and in the Bible, he has given us a specific recipe for being part of God's family that, if followed, will sustain and empower us over the years. Not only that, but the enticing aroma of this delicious dish will attract others to join the family dinner. That's the good news. The bad news is that if we don't follow this recipe, we'll always be missing something we need and that God designed for us. We also have an enemy who can deceive us into omitting something essential or even introduce a subtle poison that makes us sick over time. Sure, we might be eating something, but it won't be God's *best*. Only God's recipe can produce the life he intended for us.

There was nothing bad or unhealthy about my wife's recipe, so this analogy only goes so far. But here's the spiritual takeaway: If we are to

live the Christian life, then we need to live it as God designed it to be lived. Don't worry—he isn't trying to shoehorn us all into uniformity. There's great latitude in his overall design for us still to be individuals. But when it comes to being part of the family of God, we need to get all the ingredients right. God makes it clear in his Word what's most important, and we are invited to follow the recipe to survive and thrive.

HOPE FOR THE HUNGRY

Before I became a Christian, I had a hard time believing that church people had something I would ever want. Being a Christian did not seem to satisfy them any more than other religions satisfied (or didn't) my friends at school or work. I could detect few discernible differences.

Plus, some of the Christians I knew lived double lives. They had a “Sunday morning” language, kind and friendly and saying all the right things. Then they had an “at work or play” language—salty and full of criticism and complaining. I didn't expect them to be perfect, but they never seemed like they had found the answer to all their woes as they claimed. When honest, they would tell me they trusted few people and felt alone most of the time. They felt the pressure to be perfect in front of others, and only when they had a few drinks did the truth come out.

When I did encounter Christians who were sincere about their faith, they just didn't seem to be joyful. For some, the sky was falling because evil lurked everywhere. Others seemed to be overly joyful—almost delusional—as though it was wrong to admit something was broken in their lives because that would somehow make Jesus look bad. Either way, frankly, I didn't want to be around them.

Many were definitely “religious” in the sense that they lived with a list of dos and don'ts a mile long. But they seemed afraid of God and others, not at peace the way the Scriptures promised. They'd often say that only through Jesus could a person be saved, but they didn't seem to be saved from anything the rest of us were dealing with in real life.

I noticed that many of these Christians didn't seem like they had any

real desire to reach those of us who were “lost” either. Most believers I associated with seemed to share an unspoken understanding that you kept your faith to yourself. I wondered, if they truly believed people were going to hell, why didn’t they care enough to share their faith? But I used to think maybe because their faith didn’t change much for them, they were not very impressed with it. On the other hand, some other believers were overly zealous and wouldn’t quit talking about Jesus, but they didn’t seem to understand that how they lived was being watched and had more power than what they said to us. Gentleness and respect weren’t on their radar (1 Peter 3:15).

Most of these sincere believers seemed friendly, but they also didn’t seem to have real relationships in which they could take down their walls. When I did attend a Sunday morning service, I noticed many of these same Christians called each other “brother” and “sister,” but weren’t they the ones who told me privately that they didn’t really trust anyone? My dad was a pastor, and I’d see the stupid and trivial battles Christians fought with each other. Those battles didn’t make me want to be involved in their so-called family.

I did know a few sincere Christians who were attractive to be around, but I saw too much of the other side—insincerity, game playing, bickering. I saw the constant struggle and brokenness, and I wondered what they got in this life for following Jesus. Sure, many talked about how their hope was in the next life and how that hope carried them through. They talked about forgiveness. They talked about grace. But I didn’t see much more than talk. I couldn’t discern any big benefit for following Jesus, particularly in this life. Christians were just as messed up as non-Christians. Something was missing in the Christians’ recipe for faith and life.

At the time I thought the Christian religion was flawed at its core, but now I know that it’s just been misrepresented and misunderstood by its followers. I am now a senior pastor who has seen thousands of believers, and every week in the church I lead, I see a few different kinds of people claiming the same faith:

- **Casual Christians**—those who show up every so often and call themselves “Christians,” but their faith seems to be in name only, not in deed. They are playing a game, and no matter what Scripture says, they want to fit Jesus into a comfortable place in their lives. Sadly, they will never experience what Jesus has for them unless they choose to surrender to him.
- **“Religious” Christians**—those who add to their faith long lists of rules. Their faith has become burdensome, and they are tired spiritually, or worse yet, they have become proud, deceived into believing they are worthy because they follow the rules better than others.
- **Committed Christians**—those who follow Jesus and rely upon the Word of God, the Spirit of God, and the people of God to help them mature in their faith. I get to see how God lives in and through them, and it’s amazing.

Casual Christians and “religious” Christians are not experiencing the life they could have in Christ because they have misunderstood or have, in reality, rejected the true faith. They may have much of the recipe for living powerful faith right, but they have missed a key component that affects their ability to fully experience what God wants to give them. This is often the result of a lack of biblical relational discipleship. *Biblical relational discipleship* is the term we at Real Life Ministries use to describe the method of discipling we see Jesus displaying in his time here on earth. The New Testament lays out the process he went through of developing deep relationships with his twelve disciples, walking alongside them through a three-year period and teaching them through both words and actions how to follow and be like him. Many Christians either have never received this kind of discipleship in the church or have rejected it because of past hurt or because it required too much change to their lives.

Sadly, even in my church we have Christians who have heard about

this component but have still missed the point. As I travel around the country to work with pastors and laypeople, I see the same problems. Plenty of Christians are alone and hurting, struggling to know what their faith is all about, desperately hoping for an experience in the Lord that's greater than what they currently have.

This book is for those who are missing something and are honest enough about that to look deeper, even if it's uncomfortable and scary. They're at church, hoping for truth, often committed to praying, knowing the Bible, worshiping God, and even sharing their faith, but they're still missing something important. The spiritual recipe they're cooking with doesn't satisfy—and they wonder what to do.

If that's you, then be encouraged, because hope is at hand. Yes, we live in a sin-soaked world where the culture around us is polluted and there's a spiritual enemy who would love to destroy us. I know that in this world we will have trouble, because the Bible promises it (John 16:33). I know we all have a broken sin nature that fails to live out even the simplest recipe perfectly. But as we experience God's spiritual food and become spiritually mature, we can have Real Life now that enables us to survive and thrive in spite of all we face.

So what is missing from the recipe you have been living out?

PROTECTING THE RECIPE

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is Jude 1:3-4:

Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people. For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.

Notice that Jude initially wanted to write an encouraging letter to the church. But there was a problem: Some people were perverting the message that had been handed down to them through the apostles. They were trying to change the recipe of faith: the body of knowledge—the right doctrine and lifestyle—that had been passed down from the apostles.

In Jude's specific case, the perverted teaching was that grace meant people could follow whatever lifestyle they wanted—that Christians could go on sinning although it hurts God and others. In this false recipe, grace was being turned into a license for immorality.

Jude was challenging the Christians to follow the recipe for faith that aligns the way we think and live with how God thinks and lives. Jude explained that this right faith recipe had been delivered once and for all, and that to change it was to play into the hands of the enemy who seeks to monkey with our spiritual food.

The same is true today. The Bible warns us to hold on to the doctrine, teaching, and lifestyle modeled by Christ and the apostles. The faith handed down to us in the Bible is perfect, and the warning for messing with that faith is clear. When we consume the wrong recipe, it has dire effects on our ability to function correctly in the world we live in.

That's why Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:16, "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers." Notice how Paul combines both doctrine and life in how we function as believers. It's easy for believers to forget to put in all the ingredients, and the result is a malfunctioning faith that leaves people open to the kinds of things that destroy churches, families, and even eternities. Too many believers are focusing on an incomplete recipe, and as a result they lack the joy, peace, and strength that can get them through the battles they face. Because so many Christians don't have a thriving Christian life, others falsely conclude there is no thriving spiritual life to be had.

Some Christians have gone so far as to decide that because their faith

(which is incomplete) isn't working, then perhaps Jesus isn't who he said he is. Because they have been shown a false Jesus (by his representatives), they've rejected the faith outright. If those people could only see the real Jesus for who he is, then I believe they'd love him.

When people don't consume the right food, or enough food, or poisoned food, they do not have the strength to take on any great task. They can't fight any significant battle for long because they are too weak and tired. They do not have the ability to fight off sickness because the immune system doesn't work anymore. Human beings need healthy, consistent food to survive and thrive.

The same principles apply in the spiritual world. Too many believers are living out a form of Christianity that is only partially correct. They have only partial effectiveness and partial defense against a spiritual enemy who longs to destroy them.

JUST ME AND JESUS IS NOT ENOUGH

A few years back, a man I count as a friend informed me that he had cheated on his wife. He had been in church almost every weekend for years. He knew his Bible. I'd seen him pray, worship, and serve. He was in a powerful position in our community and had a good effect for some time on both believers and nonbelievers.

What went wrong? Whenever I asked him how life was going, he always said, "Fine." He insisted he was close to the Lord and in love with his wife and committed to his family. But whenever I asked him to join a home group and develop real relationships with other believers, he insisted he was too busy for that kind of thing. Asked to define *busy*, he rattled off a long list of activities: Sports for the kids. Family camping. Work, always work. The activities were fine in and of themselves—but when we're missing real relationship, we have an incomplete recipe for a healthy spiritual life, and disastrous results naturally follow.

Fortunately, this man told his wife the truth, and while their relationship has a long way to go to be fully restored, he is back on

track and willing to make time for what I asked him to do in the first place (really, what the Bible *declares* he should do). He's following the recipe in a quest to salvage both a marriage and a reputation that he very well may have lost for good. But if he had simply followed the complete recipe in the first place, he would have been protected from falling.

So what are we missing from our recipe?

Relationship.

The entire Bible is about relationship. Not just relationship with God, but relationship with *other people* as well. The crucial ingredient so many Christians are missing is the power that comes from being together.

The opening act in Scripture tells us we were created in the image of God. Later, both through Scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ, we learn that God is love. This means that we were created to be relational beings. God did not create us because he was lonely, but God is relational at his very core. The Trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—has been in a love relationship for all eternity.

Consider the creation story in Genesis. God created one thing and then said it was good. He created something else, and again pronounced it good. That pattern was repeated until God created man and said something was not good. Why? Because man was alone.

It's key to note that Adam wasn't completely alone. He had God, who walked and talked with him in the garden. Imagine that—Adam was the first human enjoying a perfect relationship with his Creator, yet even then God said something was not good. It's because Adam was created to be in relationship with other humans *as well as* with God. God created Eve so Adam could be in relationship with another human being. (Notice that I don't say "with a spouse." Scripture reveals over and over that God meant for us to have relationship with other humans, regardless of our marital status.)

Many Christians today mistakenly believe the only thing that matters is their relationship with God. "It's just me and Jesus," they'll say. But that's not what Scripture tells us at all. We were created to love God

and to love others. Both are important. Granted, your most important relationship is with God through Jesus Christ. It is out of the overflow of an abiding relationship with Jesus that we have the capacity to be in relationship with others. But God tells us in his Word that to have real relationship with him is to have real relationship with others.

Right away in Genesis, humankind found out what happens when we mess up relationships. The fall in the Garden of Eden was about people falling out of perfect relationship with God, resulting in death—and far more than just physical death. Because God is a God of relationship, the enemy knew that to destroy relationship with God would be to topple the first domino in a potentially endless domino line leading to destruction:

- Our perfect relationship with the earth fell apart. Weeds began to grow to make life hard. From then on, we'd have to work to produce food by the sweat of our brow.
- The marital relationship was damaged. God told the woman that her desire would be for her husband, but he would rule over her (Genesis 3:16). Every husband would like that to mean his wife would desire him physically (which would be great) while he gets to be boss! It actually means that the woman would desire to control her husband, but he would seek to rule over her, and a battle for control in the home ensued.
- Relationships with children were supposed to be a beautiful thing, but instead there would be pain in childbearing. (And those of us who have kids know there is pain in child-rearing as well.) Scripture reveals that there would be a spiritual battle from then on.

Ultimately, the death resulting from the Fall was much more profound than we could have imagined, because if relationship with God is lost, then relationship between people also falls. For beings created to be in relationship, this is devastating. The very thing we were created

for and need would never be attainable because of sin, unless something miraculous happened to remedy the situation. That's a curse indeed.

The good news is that God is a God of reconciliation and has orchestrated history to define his love, revealed as grace, giving us what we need rather than what we deserve. Jesus came into the picture to offer us the choice for restoration of all that had once been destroyed.

Jesus came to love and forgive us and restore our fellowship with God—and as a result, to restore our fellowship with others (1 John 1:7). The history of humankind began with perfect fellowship and will conclude with fellowship restored in a new heaven and a new earth. The Bible says over and over that God's desire is that we again will be his people and he will be our God. That's relationship!

CHEAP RAFTS ON A RAGING RIVER

A few summers ago, my wife, children, grandchildren, and I took a two-hour float trip down the beautiful Saint Joe River. Every summer people flock to the river with their rafts and tubes to take the leisurely, sun-filled trip. Because the river is shallow in the summer, few people wear life jackets. If it gets too bumpy, even youngsters can just stand up on their feet.

We didn't have enough tubes for everyone, so we picked up several cheap tubes from Walmart. But as I was floating down the river on a cheap, thin-skinned tube with no life jacket, a thought entered my mind: Would I float with my family on these same cheap tubes if this river was filled with class III, IV, and V rapids?

Of course not. So what kind of equipment would I require before taking this group down that kind of river? I pictured seriously expensive rafts with oars and life jackets. I pictured an alert and experienced river guide who'd been trained and knew the river's every turn. I pictured him training us to work together in the slow-moving water, getting us ready for what he knew was coming.

Then I thought about the Christian life. Too many Christians are

missing out on the relationships they were created for—and as a result they have a faith like an eight-dollar inner tube. Their tube might get them down an easy river okay, but they'll sink in any kind of trouble or emergency or white water. A faith without relationships is not a faith designed for serious rafting.

In our world today, we are navigating a river filled with rapids, increasingly dangerous and often at flood stage. Our culture has quickly moved to an anti-Christian position, and most of us are not ready for it. If Christians are to survive this turbulent culture, then we will need a faith that is just as God designed it to be: supported and surrounded by a team of rafters with the right equipment, all working together to navigate dangerous waters.

We also need to remember that there is a big difference between being friendly and polite to people and having real, life-giving relationship. We say words like *relationship*, *friendship*, and *love*, but these words have been redefined by our enemy, who often controls the culture, and they lose their power. Yes, we need relationship with God and others. But it's very important that the relationship we seek is defined by Scripture, not by the world.

If our faith is going to survive the times we are in, we will need far more than an eight-dollar Walmart tube to take on a culture that is like a furious river without mercy. What kind of tube are you on? And what kind of team is around you?