

# A Time to Step Back?: God's Purposes for Relational Distance

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- I. **Introduction**
  
- II. **Engaging in relationships or pursuing intimacy with others is easier said than done**
  - A. Two common difficult dynamics:
    1. Rejected intimacy: you have pursued and invested in others, but they have not reciprocated your interest or the investment in the relationship, maybe they have *even* withdrawn or become hostile in response to your pursuit.
  
    2. Unsafe intimacy: in your relationships, others have mishandled or exploited your vulnerability, taken advantage of your generosity, treated you like an object instead of a person, intruded upon your privacy, imposed themselves or their demands upon you, betrayed your trust or let you down when you depended on them.
  
- III. **In some of our relationships, we feel pressured to either fix these dynamics or minimize how they hurt us because we have taken on a responsibility that God hasn't given us.**
  - A. We find ourselves feeling responsible not just for *pursuing* intimacy, but *achieving* it, and any evidence of distance feels threatening because it points to our failure.
  
  - B. Some questions for identifying this over-responsibility:
    1. Have you ever felt overly preoccupied with analyzing or fixing a relationship?
  
    2. Have you noticed that you are less focused on loving these individuals and more focused on appeasing them?

3. When you have the opportunity to talk about these patterns with them, do you find yourself trying to prove that you are “in the right” or focusing on winning the argument?
4. Or do you feel a sense of urgency to resolve issues to prevent feeling a sense of lingering shame or guilt, or in order to prevent future rejection or mistreatment?
5. Have you subjected yourself to the same mistreatment or betrayal over and over because you were convicted that Christian love *requires* you to offer second chances, and third chances, and fourth chances...?
6. Have you reached a point in these relationships where someone’s inability to meet your expectations has tempted you to attack or punish them?
7. Have you noticed a tendency to vacillate between black-or-white assessments or all-or-nothing choices?

**IV. Scripture makes it clear that while God hates relational brokenness, he’s not unwilling to permit or even enforce distance in relationships.**

A. Genesis 3 - The distance he allows and imposes was a means of preserving the possibility of true intimacy.

B. The nature of true intimacy:

1. True intimacy is designed and defined only by God
2. True intimacy requires voluntary choice by both people
3. True intimacy requires holiness and maturity.
4. True intimacy is a progressive process.

**V. Those of us who feel anxious about relational separation need to be willing to permit or pursue distance in our relationships if we want true intimacy.**

- A. Our highest priority is not securing intimacy, but faithfulness to God, and faithfulness means submitting to *his* design.
- B. Distance may be required in order to *dignify* the other individual's personhood and choices.
- C. Distance may be required in order to protect our relationships and each person's vulnerability
- D. We need a step by step, "as fits the occasion," God-dependent approach.

VI. Reflection: **What relationships have come to mind as you've been listening?**

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VII. **How do we practice "stepping back to faithfully move toward"?**

- A. While our *purposes* need to align with God's, our practices will differ because we are *not* God but rather his dependent children.

VIII. **Our practice will always start with considering how we have viewed God's involvement in our relationship, identifying the places where we have left him out, and developing new habits of inviting him in.**

- A. **What are you afraid will happen if you allow or create distance, and how are you trying to prevent this outcome by functionally assuming God's role and responsibilities?**
  - 1. Do you entrust God with this relationship? Do you believe that he desires redemption and intimacy for it even more than you do?
  - 2. Do you entrust God with this person's safety, wellbeing, or sanctification?
  - 3. Do you draw your identity from God's assessment or treatment of you?

4. Do you believe his words that suffering in your relationships is a reminder of your union with Christ?
5. Do you believe that God will provide fruit in the long run if you are faithful to him?
6. When you feel hopeful or hurt by this relationship, is your first instinct to turn to God and share this with him?
7. To summarize: What do you need to believe about God in order to hand this person or this relationship over to him? What passages should you have in hand to steady you when you are tempted to take them back?

**B. *Facing and grieving our present reality with God***

**C. *Embracing the true future hope that he offers***

**IX. Stepping back is an opportunity to seek discernment so we can move toward with clarity, humility, and confidence.**

**A. Pursuing insight - gaining awareness of what is happening:**

1. What are the patterns that typify your negative dynamic with this person?
  - a) It's helpful to identify a recent example of the pattern and map out a timeline of how it unfolded on a piece of paper. If you're having trouble remembering, it's usually easiest to start from the end and work your way back. So: How did things end and how did you get there? At what point did they turn negative? How did the conversation get started?
  - b) Where are you surprised or disappointed by what you did or said? What were your unspoken or unconscious expectations going into this interaction—for them or yourself—and how did they impact your choices? Were there places where you resisted allowing or creating distance that might have been beneficial or appropriate, and why?

**B. Pursuing intentionality - preparing and planning for *future* interactions.**

1. What do you want to do differently if and when this type of situation presents itself?
  - a) What temptations do you need to be aware of? What expectations do you need to adjust? What steps could you take, and at what points do you need to take them to change the pattern? What kind of encouragement and faith do you need from the Lord to take these steps?
2. For those of us who feel uncomfortable with distance, it may look like planning to pursue space in the moment.

**C. In moving toward we are seeking to:**

1. Imitate Christ
2. Inform honestly
3. Inquire humbly
4. Invite confidently

**X. Closing: our need for the body of Christ in this process**