

Relationship Grids – Mapping the Way We Connect

We were created for connection. From the very beginning, God said, *"It is not good for man to be alone."* And yet, many of us live in relationships that leave us exhausted, unseen, overly dependent, or emotionally distant. Why? Because we don't always understand *how* we relate—or *why* we relate the way we do.

Today, I want to introduce you to a powerful framework called a **Relationship Grid**—a tool that maps how we show up in our relationships: in friendship, marriage, parenting, work, and even in our relationship with God. This particular grid we will focus on spans a continuum from **unhealthy enmeshment** and **co-dependency** to **healthy interdependence**, and all the way to **emotional detachment** and avoidance. Somewhere on this spectrum, you and I live every day. You'll recognize yourself in some of these patterns—like the **Doormat**, the **Rescuer**, or the **Controller**. Others of us might identify with the **Avoidant**, the **Cynic**, or the **Ghost**. These aren't just labels; they reflect deep beliefs, unmet needs, and relational habits shaped by our past.

But the good news is this: Jesus invites us into a **new way of relating**—one marked by truth, love, boundaries, grace, and healing. By shining light on our relational defaults, we can begin to uproot the patterns that sabotage connection and build on the ones that reflect God's design for wholeness.

So today, as we end our series on EQ, I invite you to do some brave, holy reflection. To ask: *Where do I lose myself in relationships? Where do I shut down? And where is God calling me to grow in love, honesty, and emotional maturity?* Because **when we heal how we relate, we transform how we live.**

A relationship grid is a framework or visual map used to understand patterns of how individuals relate to others, especially in emotionally significant relationships (romantic, family, work, etc.). It plots relational behaviours, needs, and identities along key dimensions such as closeness vs distance, dependence vs independence, or self vs other. In a kind of appendix at the end of my notes I have examples of different grids, like Bowmen's Family Systems Grid, the Co-dependency Grid, the Attachment Grid, and others. Relationship Grids help to answer questions like; How do I typically behave in relationships? What motivates drives my relational style? Where do I lose myself or others? How do I show up in times of conflict, stress, or intimacy? Many relationship dynamics can be mapped on a **continuum**—from extreme enmeshment and co-dependency to extreme emotional detachment. In this message I will show you this continuum and encourage you to reflect on yourself to identify the healthy patterns on which to build and to uproot any unhealthy ones. Bringing light to this will have a life changing effect on how you relate to yourself and to others.

A. UNHEALTHY ENMESHMENT & CODEPENDENCY (Loss of Self)

1. The Self-Eraser / Doormat

- Over-accommodates others, suppresses own needs
- Discomfort with saying no
- Chronic people-pleasing

Core Belief: My worth depends on others being happy with me.

Primary Needs: Acceptance, approval, safety through compliance

"Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe." — Proverbs 29:25

2. The Rescuer / Fixer

- Takes responsibility for others' emotions or problems
- Intrudes under the guise of "helping"
- Gets identity from being needed

Core Belief: If I don't fix it, everything will fall apart.

Primary Needs: To be needed, to reduce chaos, to feel in control

"Each one should test their own actions... for each one should carry their own load." — Galatians 6:4–5

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ." — Galatians 6:2 (Note the balance!)

3. The Martyr

- Sacrifices self constantly for others, with hidden resentment
- Seeks validation through suffering
- Passive-aggressive tendencies when unacknowledged

Core Belief: Suffering proves my love and value.

Primary Needs: Validation through sacrifice, emotional recognition

"If I give all I possess to the poor... but do not have love, I gain nothing." — 1 Corinthians 13:3

4. The Clinger

- Extreme fear of abandonment
- Merges identity with partner
- Overly dependent on emotional closeness

Core Belief: If I'm not close, I'll be abandoned.

Primary Needs: Reassurance, closeness, constant contact

"Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save." — Psalm 146:3

"Remain in me, as I also remain in you." — John 15:4 (Secure attachment in Christ)

5. The Controller / Overfunctioner

- Takes charge to feel safe
- Manages or "improves" others to reduce own anxiety
- Masks insecurity through dominance
- "If I don't do it, everything will fall apart."

Core Belief: Control is the only way to stay safe.

Primary Needs: Certainty, predictability, emotional control

“In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength.” — Isaiah 30:15

An overfunctioner steps in too much—doing more than their share, taking responsibility for others' emotions or tasks, and often trying to control outcomes. They appear highly competent, but underneath there is usually anxiety, fear of chaos, or a need to be needed. To break the cycle, both people (Over and under functioner) must do some internal work:

Overfunctioner needs to: let go, allow others to fail and grow, tolerate discomfort, trust God more than control.

Underfunctioner needs to: step up, take responsibility, engage with discomfort, build confidence.

The Overfunctioner–Underfunctioner Dance

These roles often exist **in pairs**, especially in close relationships (e.g., marriage, family, ministry teams):

OVERFUNCTIONER → UNDERFUNCTIONER

Micromanages	← Withdraws
Takes control	← Becomes passive
Feels resentful	← Feels inadequate
Becomes anxious	← Becomes helpless

Imagine two dancers in a three-legged race. One is always pulling ahead, doing most of the work, trying to steer, shouting instructions. The other lags behind, hesitant, unsure, relying on the first to lead everything.

At first, they make progress—but it's exhausting. The front-runner gets frustrated: *“Why won't you do more?”* The one behind feels inadequate: *“Why bother trying if I can't keep up?”*

This is the dance of the Overfunctioner and Underfunctioner in relationships. One person overreaches—taking control, managing others' emotions, doing more than their share—not because they're bad, but because anxiety drives them to keep everything together. The other unconsciously adapts by doing less—becoming passive, withdrawn, or dependent—not because they're lazy, but because the space to grow has been unknowingly taken.

Result? Resentment, burnout, and emotional disconnection.

But in a healthy relationship—what the Bible might call “mutual submission” (Ephesians 5:21)—both partners learn to step in rhythm. Each carries their own load, while also bearing one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2–5). It's not one carrying the dance while the other rides along—it's a mutual, grace-filled movement.

How do these relate to co-dependency?

In my series on alcohol and its effects, I mentioned to you that I would discuss the issue of co-dependency in the context of EQ. You will see that all five of these dysfunctions that we have covered so far are fuel for the codependent person.

Co-dependency, in relation to alcohol, is a dysfunctional relationship pattern where a non-addicted partner or family member enables or supports the alcoholic's behaviour—often by prioritizing the alcoholic's

needs over their own, tolerating harmful behaviours, or attempting to control the addiction—while neglecting their own well-being.

Signs of co-dependency

- A. Routine sacrifice**
- B. Feeling responsible for the other** (e.g. Making excuses for addictive behaviour).
- C. Feeling the relationship is all they have in their life** (e.g. Unhealthy attachment and self-worth issues).
- D. Denial about behaviour of both parties in the relationship.** (The addict's behavior and the codependent's behaviour).
- E. Depression, guilt and shame**
- F. Strong rescuer tendencies** (Sometimes Co-dependents will get into relationships with people they can rescue. This need to rescue often enables the behaviour and blocks treatment). The codependent thinks they are being kind and compassionate to the addict but in actual fact they're primarily getting their own needs met.

B. HEALTHY INTERDEPENDENCE (Balance of Self and Other)

6. The Differentiated Partner

- Holds clear boundaries while remaining connected
- Can self-regulate emotions
- Mutual respect for each person's autonomy and needs

Core Belief: I can be close and still be myself.

Primary Needs: Respect, autonomy, secure connection

“As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” — Proverbs 27:17

“Two are better than one... if either of them falls, one can help the other up.” — Ecclesiastes 4:9–10

7. The Mutual Supporter

- Offers help without over-identifying or over-rescuing
- Listens without trying to fix
- Celebrates both independence and togetherness

Core Belief: We're stronger when we support each other.

Primary Needs: Mutuality, trust, shared effort

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” — Ephesians 5:21

“Encourage one another and build each other up.” — 1 Thessalonians 5:11

8. The Collaborative Communicator

- Engages in honest, respectful dialogue
- Can disagree without rupturing connection
- Shares power and emotional labour

Core Belief: Honest dialogue builds real intimacy.

Primary Needs: Clarity, respect, emotional honesty

“Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body...” — Ephesians 4:15

“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” — James 1:19

C. UNHEALTHY DETACHMENT & AVOIDANCE (Loss of Connection)

9. The Avoidant / Distancer

- Emotionally unavailable or dismissive
- Shuts down intimacy or vulnerability
- Fears engulfment

Core Belief: Too much closeness is dangerous.

Primary Needs: Space, independence, personal freedom and emotional safety

“Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment.” — Proverbs 18:1 (ESV used here for clarity)

“Carry each other’s burdens...” — Galatians 6:2

10. The Lone Wolf / Underfunctioner

- Expects to be self-sufficient at all times
- Avoids asking for help
- Withdraws under stress
- Lacks vigour and becomes disengaged

Core Belief: I must do everything on my own.

Primary Needs: Independence, low emotional demands

“The lazy do not roast any game, but the diligent feed on the riches of the hunt.” — Proverbs 12:27

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord...” — Colossians 3:23

11. The Cynic / Critic

- Uses sarcasm, judgment, or detachment as defence

- Distrusts emotional expression
- May devalue closeness to avoid risk

Core Belief: Feelings are a trap; I need to protect myself.

Primary Needs: Defensiveness, detachment, emotional control

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful..." — Ephesians 4:29

"Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." — 1 Corinthians 13:7

12. The Ghost / Stonewaller

- Disconnects completely (emotionally or physically)
- Refuses to engage in resolution
- Uses silence or disappearance as control

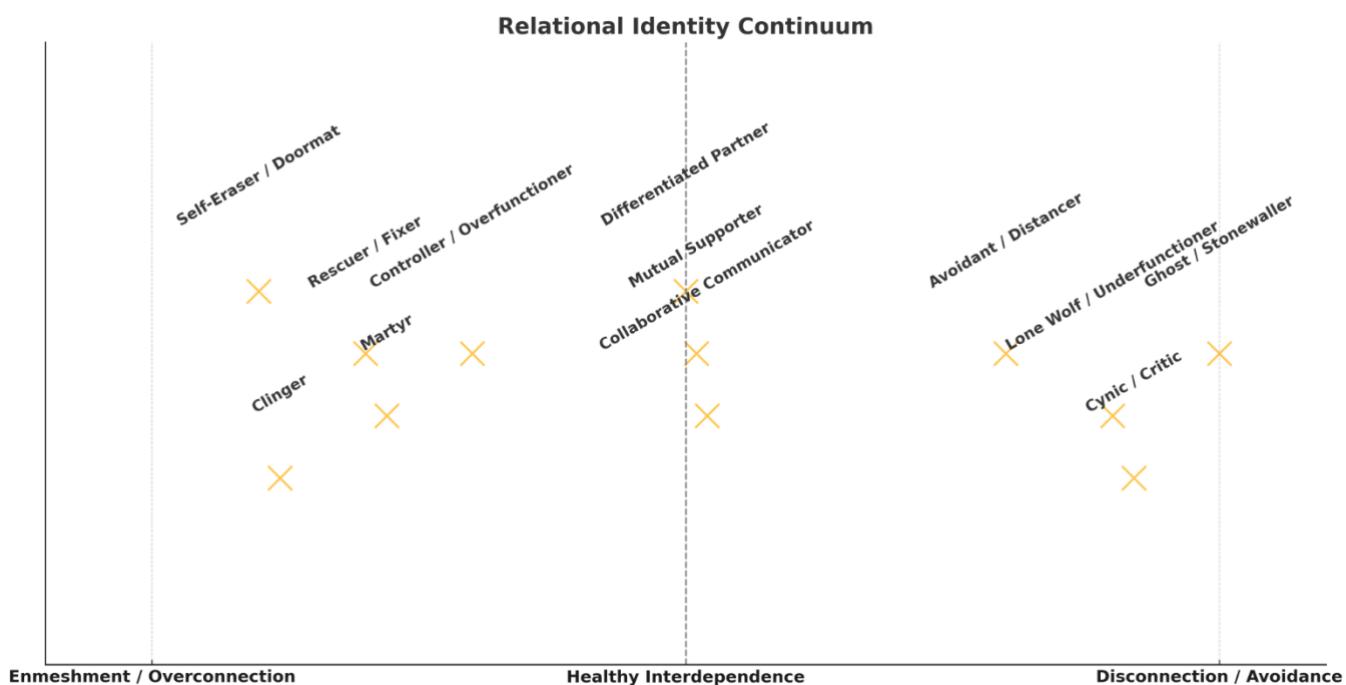
Core Belief: Silence protects me from emotional chaos.

Primary Needs: Avoidance, peace, control through silence

"If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you." — Matthew 18:15

"Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." — James 5:16

Here is a table showing you the spread on the continuum.



Samples of Relationship Grids

1. Attachment Grid

Focus: *Emotional Bonds & Security*

Style	Core Belief	Typical Behaviour	Need
Secure	"I'm lovable and others are reliable."	Balanced closeness and independence	Connection & autonomy
Anxious	"I must cling or I'll be abandoned."	Preoccupied, over-dependent	Reassurance & closeness
Avoidant	"Closeness is dangerous or smothering."	Emotionally distant, self-reliant	Space & autonomy
Disorganized	"I want closeness, but I fear being hurt."	Push-pull, chaotic patterns	Safety & emotional healing

 **Goal:** Move toward *earned secure attachment* through self-awareness, healing, and safe relationships.

2. Imago Relationship Grid

Focus: *Partner as Mirror for Unmet Childhood Needs*

Childhood Experience	Adaptation	Attracts Partner Who...	Conflict Triggers...
Emotionally unavailable parent	Became hyper-attuned to others	Is emotionally distant	Feelings of abandonment or invisibility
Overly controlling parent	Became passive or compliant	Is dominant or directive	Feeling overpowered or voiceless
Conditional love or praise	Became perfectionistic	Is critical or withholding	Feeling never good enough
Chaotic or inconsistent care	Became hyper-vigilant	Is unpredictable or unstable	Feelings of fear or lack of control

 **Goal:** Use conflict as a path to healing, recognizing your partner as a mirror to unresolved childhood pain, and consciously growing into mutual empathy.

3. Co-dependency Grid

Focus: *Control vs Compliance Dynamics*

	Controller	Compliant (People-Pleaser)
Fear	Fear of chaos or vulnerability	Fear of rejection or conflict
Strategy	Control others to feel safe	Submit to others to stay connected
Needs Ignored	Others' autonomy	Own needs and desires
Common Traits	Perfectionism, micromanagement	Self-erasure, guilt, resentment
Relational Pattern	Dominate or fix others	Merge or appease others

 **Goal:** Heal from co-dependency by setting boundaries, reclaiming agency, and developing mutual respect.

4. Bowen's Family Systems Grid

Focus: *Differentiation of Self vs Emotional Reactivity*

	Low Differentiation (Fusion)	High Differentiation (Mature Self)
Emotional Reactivity	Highly reactive, anxious	Calm, thoughtful under pressure
Sense of Identity	Dependent on others' opinions	Clear sense of self and values
Relationship Behaviour	Enmeshed, seeks approval	Can stay connected without conforming
Typical Reaction	Over-involvement or cutoff	Healthy boundaries and presence

 **Goal:** Increase *differentiation of self* — the ability to stay emotionally connected without losing self-definition.

5. Common Axes or Dimensions in a Relationship Grid

Axis	Low End	High End
Closeness / Connection	Avoidance / Withdrawal	Enmeshment / Over-involvement
Autonomy / Boundaries	Compliance / Self-erasure	Isolation / Stonewalling
Responsibility	Overfunctioning / Control	Underfunctioning / Passivity
Emotional Expression	Suppression / Detachment	Over-disclosure / Reactivity
Self vs Other Focus	Self-sacrifice / Martyrdom	Self-centeredness / Narcissism

Reflection Questions

Self-Awareness & Identity

1. Which relational identity on the continuum (e.g., Doormat, Rescuer, Controller) do I most resonate with—and why?
(*What behaviours or beliefs in me align with that identity?*)
2. What core belief might be driving my relational style?
(*E.g., "My worth depends on others being happy with me" or "Control is the only way to stay safe."*)
3. Do I tend to lose myself or others in relationships? If so, how?

Emotional Health & Boundaries

4. How do I typically respond in moments of conflict, stress, or intimacy—do I lean toward enmeshment, control, or avoidance?
5. What boundaries do I need to strengthen or set in my relationships to protect both love and truth?

Relational Patterns

6. How have past experiences (family, trauma, unmet childhood needs) shaped the way I relate today?
(*Consider insights from the Imago Grid.*)
7. Have I ever confused co-dependency with compassion or love? In what ways might I be enabling rather than empowering others?

 **Transformation & Growth**

8. **What does healthy interdependence look like for me—and how can I move toward becoming a Differentiated Partner, Mutual Supporter, or Collaborative Communicator?**
9. **What scripture from this message speaks directly to a change I need to make in how I relate to others?**

What one practical step can I take this week to bring light to and transform one unhealthy relational pattern in my life?