

## Cultivating Friendship: Extolling Friendships Virtue Various Passages

**Introduction:** There are not too many things in life that are worthwhile that come to us easily. Something that is valuable must be worked at and cultivated if it is going to grow. This includes a job, hobby, activity, schooling, but especially relationships. Friendships are a gift. We looked a few weeks ago how God created mankind for friendship, how it was then corrupted by sin, and redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. **JC Ryle** said, "*The world is full of sorrow because it is full of sin. It is a dark place. It is a lonely place. It is a disappointing place. The brightest sunbeam in it is a friend. Friendship halves our troubles and doubles our joys.*" The Fall of sin did not take away friendships, but it did make them much more difficult to have, grow, and maintain. However, because God has befriended us in Christ (John 15:12-16), and because we can express God's grace together in community (Romans 12), true Biblical friendship is possible. This morning we want to look at how we cultivate and extol Biblical friendships, identifying the Biblical marks of how its played out. Since the Bible speaks about friendship often, particularly in the book of Proverbs, God not only wants us to *know* about it but also *practice* friendship in life.

### **Purposeful: We aim at the same thing**

If there is one aspect of every relationship that when realized unlocks its fullest expression, it is the aspect of **purpose**. What is the purpose of our relationships in marriage? In the church? In the home? If the answer to any of these questions is: "For fun", "for fulfillment", or "I don't know", relationships will wander aimlessly, undulating up and down based on a random set of priorities. That is why C.S. Lewis said the following about friendship:

*"That is why those pathetic people who simply "want friends' can never make any. The very condition of making friends is that we should want something else besides friends. **Friendship must be about something.** Those who have nothing can share nothing; those who are going nowhere can have no fellow travelers."*<sup>1</sup>

So what is friendship all about?

### **Biblical Friends Have Christ as the Ultimate Goal**

Often the definition or expression of friendship is anchored around common interests or affinities. We enjoy the same activity so our relationships center around that, whether at the gym, fishing, cycling, or love of art. We unite around sports teams, finding a rooting interest breeds conversation and allies. Stages of life also produce relationships, whether its moms with kids at the park or looking for activities on a Friday night. Now, to be clear, none of this is in the category of "wrong" or "unbiblical", but it does fall short of something far greater and deeper that is offered to us.

Biblical friendships are not about something but **someone**. Christian friendship is about Jesus Christ, who not only provides the purpose but the motivation, the goal and the power. In a sense, Jesus should always be present in whatever friendship we engage in, making Him the third friend. This means that how we choose friends is extremely important. **Thomas Brooks said** "*Let those be your choicest companions who have made Christ their chief companion.*"<sup>2</sup> We must cultivate friendships with those

<sup>1</sup> C.S Lewis, "*The Four Loves*", p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> Drew Hunter, "*Made for Friendship*", p. 92

who mutually pursue Christ, who spur us on to love and good deeds, and who share the same goal. This is what the writer of Hebrews captured in chapter 10:

**Hebrews 10:24-25** - *"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but **encouraging one another**, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."*

We've often said that though we should pursue relationships with unbelievers, those relationships and friendships will be limited. You have **more in common** with a believer that you don't know than with an unbeliever you've known your whole life. We will spend eternity with fellow believers, serving and worshipping Christ both now and forever. This is why Christ becomes the ultimate glue of our friendship, and also why we can befriend those who are **unlike us**, who don't have the same interests or affinity, since we have the greatest desire in common together.

### **Biblical Friends Purposefully counsel toward that End:**

What does this purpose breed and look like? It means that we embrace the idea that we share **responsibility** to help each other in that pursuit. Sometimes worldly relationships are selfish at the core, viewing friendship through the lens of what is in it for me, how the friend we make can further our career or network at a greater width.

*"The deepest of friendships have in common this desire to make the other person royalty. they work for and rejoice in the other's elevation and achievements. **There are no hooks in such friendships**, not desire to manipulate or control, no jealousy or exclusiveness ---- simply a desire for the best for the other."<sup>3</sup>*

Part of the responsibility we have is to **counsel each other**, which means both time and intention. I love the bit that Brian Regan does in his comedy show, where his wife asks about his friend Gary who he went golfing all day with. She wanted to know how he was doing after his divorce, if he was dating anyone, etc. Brian's response was, "how would I know that?". 'Because you spent all day with him. What did you talk about?' 'We didn't talk about **that!**' But we must be intentional with each other.

"Don't let the word *counsel* scare you away. *Counseling* is simply inter-personal ministry. It is living out the one-anothers of Scripture together. In Biblical friendship, counseling can and should thrive naturally."<sup>4</sup>

**Proverbs 15:22** - *Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed*

**Proverbs 24:5-6** - *A wise man is full of strength, and a man of knowledge enhances his might, for by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory."*

**Proverbs 27:9** - *Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the **sweetness of a friend** comes from his earnest counsel.*

**Proverbs 27:17** - *Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another*

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<sup>3</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *"Disciplines of a Godly Man"*, p. 62

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Holmes, *"The Company we Keep,"* p. 56.

We counsel each other by encouragement, which should characterize the main use of Scripture, but also through exhortation since we are all prone to deception, to be taken captive by sin and the siren song of pursuing something outside of God's will. Friends embrace the responsibility to undue what Cain declared after he killed his brother, "am I my brothers keeper?" (Genesis 4:9).

**Hebrews 3:12-13** - *"Take care brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But **exhort one another every day**, as long as its called 'today', that none of you may be **hardened** by the deceitfulness of sin."*

### **Faithful: We commit to the same thing**

True friendships are built to last, designed to grow, and stand the test of time. We live in a day of **disposable friendships**, relationships that can be deleted with a swipe, click, or by suddenly ending a relationship without explanation and withdrawing all communication. This happens in our culture so often there is a term coined to describe it: *ghosting*. That is why the type of friendships we are looking for are those that will be **committed and sacrificial**. Proverbs describes this modern problem this way:

**Proverbs 18:24** *"A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is **a friend who sticks closer than a brother.**"*

Consumeristic friendships are based on personal advantage rather than personal enjoyment. In other words, where some relationships seek to use, Biblical friendships seek to enjoy. When we truly enjoy the person that we befriend, we begin to actually enjoy the things they love (activities, hobbies, others, etc). These are not the **basis** of the friendship but rather the expression of love within the friendship. This is exactly what we see in the relationship between David and Jonathan, one anointed by God to be the future king, the other who was in line as the son of the current king. Their relationship was not easy since Jonathans dad tried to kill David, and Jonathan had to step in and help multiple times. Proverbs says adversity grows rather than destroys friendships.

**Proverbs 17:17** - *"A friends loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity."*

Jonathan and David had their hearts knit together, loved each other as their own soul, and made a covenant in their friendship (1 Sam. 18:1, 3). Jonathan **delighted in David**, even though on the surface it looked as though David was his competition (1 Sam. 19:1). They were willing to express their affection for each other, and after Jonathan was killed in battle, David expressed his affection, "**Jonathan lies slain on your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant have you been to me; your love for me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of a woman.**" (2 Sam. 1:26). Affection bred loyalty and commitment, and even went beyond family bonds.

**Proverbs 27:10** - *"Do not forsake your friend and your fathers friend, and do not go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity. **Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away.**"*

Notice that committed friendships transcend circumstance, affinity, culture, and even age. In my time with Latin America pastors I observed men from different countries, styles, church sizes, ages, and economic realities who committed to each other for the sake of the gospel and planting of new churches. Friendship so often is a choice we can make, particularly when we have our greatest satisfaction in Christ and can allow love for Him overflow into the relationships we have entered into.

**Truthful: We speak the same thing**

**Proverbs 27:5-6** "Better is open rebuke than hidden love. **Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.**"

**Proverbs 28:23** - "Whoever rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with his tongue."

One of the clearest passages about the necessity and direction of friendship in Scripture is Proverbs 27:6. How often have we had a friend who made a terrible decision or moved down a path that was destructive and we said nothing, keeping our mouth shut rather than risk them being upset with us. We think that it is more **loving to say nothing rather than risk hurting them**, and instead watch more damage happen as a result. No one would have a problem telling someone they were drinking poison by accident if we knew the bottle was mislabeled, even if someone's feelings were hurt at the time (Don't tell me what to do!). This proverbial wisdom is abundantly clear that false friends will tell us that everything is ok, that we do not need to change, that we are good to go. At the front end this seems loving, but in the end this is the mark of an enemy. So if **wounding is part of friendship, what does that look like?**

**We must be wise in our wounds** - A friend wields his exhortation or rebuke as a scalpel rather than an axe. Wounds should be about the issue at hand rather than generalizations (You acted selfishly vs. you are selfish) and staying away from all inclusive statements ('You always....You never"). This means we don't use this in anger or reaction. Often the best times to have conversations about a sin or even perceived deceptive direction are best had when the issue is NOT at hand to keep emotion low. A wound must be followed up with sutures, meaning there needs to be a redemptive path, with encouragement and affirmation rather than slashing and dashing (You do this....well, see you later)

**We must expect wounds from our friends** - We want real friends, not fans. Fans are not willing to say the hard thing for risk of the relationship. The mutuality of friendship demands that I am not only willing to call out sin in someone I love, but must expect it as well. This is so counter-intuitive, admittedly. But my best friends are the most truthful with me, and those that are the closest are those that I've felt the freedom to say hard things.

**We must be vaults of information, not sieves** - If we are going to risk the wounds of entering into the mess, we must be **vaults of information** (Prov. 11:13). The best way to crush a friend is to share the intimate details with someone else, to gossip and slander rather than cover. If we are wanting to be trusted with dealing with the heart issues of a friend, we must be a vault, meaning there will be things that we carry that NO ONE will know. This is part of bearing with one another as we carry burdens and details.

**We must keep the truth in love in balance**

**Ephesians 4:15** "Rather (than children tossed by waves of deceitful schemes) **speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.**

A decision to NOT say the hard thing leads to **assumptions, which leads to false conclusions, which concludes in separation**. Speaking the truth means we are going to be slow to assume and quick to ask. It also means that **HOW we approach is as important as WHAT we say**. How we approach our friends is important. If we are sensing a pattern that we are concerned with, we need to give room for honesty, without judgment, and without assumption, willing to concede we are wrong. Remember, in almost every confrontation in a sinful situation I've been a part of, the **process was criticized far more than the**

**actual issue.** We must prayerfully consider our motives and intentions BEFORE we enter into conversation, both to guard our heart and words, but also that God would soften hearts, which is the only way to truly have success. But I am convinced that even though there is a risk in having hard conversations, the risk is worth it, love demands it, and friendships are the context for it. Far too often we choose **self-love** and keep our mouths shut, to the detriment of relationships and well being.

### Careful: We empathize over the same thing

If we are going to take responsibility to confront and exhort, we must equally as committed to being careful with our friends, seeking to understand them, to listen, and love the way they want to be loved, not the way we want to. In **1 Thess. 5:14**, all of our encouragement, exhortation and help is governed by **patience**, and all restoration of sin must be done in a spirit of **gentleness** (Gal. 6:1).

### Friends exercise wisdom in what is appropriate

**Proverbs 25:20** - *Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar in soda*

Empathy seeks to understand the need of the moment, the emotional state of a friend and to act appropriately. When there is a hardship, trial, or time of suffering, it not the time to sing real loud for all to hear (Buddy the Elf was wrong!). A friend much recognize the heavy heartedness of the person they love and speak and act accordingly.

### Friends are careful with their words

**Proverbs 27:14** - *Whoever blesses his neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing*

One of the best counsels I received from John McIntosh was to take the temperature of a room before I entered. I had a knack for entering with what some would say would be loud, boisterous energy. On occasion this meant that the conversation of the room had been sad or serious, and I came in without awareness, which created dissonance and did not communicate love and care.

The other we must be careful of is what questions we ask each other. It crushes a woman dealing with infertility who is asked "so, when are you going to have a baby?". Or to the divorced or widowed woman "why doesn't your husband come with you?" These questions do not have a negative motive in mind, but they do not bless, and could feel like cursing to those who hear.

**Friends are willing to weep and rejoice** - Sometimes, the very appropriate thing in friendship is to be there and say nothing, to communicate love and sorrow, and to commit to pray. Sometimes we just need to weep and say nothing (Rom. 12:15). Job's friends were on the right track in caring for their friend while they sat with him in mourning, until they opened their mouth and tried to give answers. Sometimes we need to give some space and simply provide a meal, or to provide an ear to talk to. This means we must act wisely with consideration with all, but especially friends.

### Transparent: We open up over the same thing

**1 John 1:6-7** - *If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have **fellowship with one another**, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*

**2 John 12** - *Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk **face to face**, so that our joy may be complete.* (cf. 3 John 13-14)

Finally, we must exercise the overused catchword of the church: *transparency*. True friendships are where you can open up the recesses of your heart and mind, can share the "skeleton in the closet" sins, and know that you will find truth and love. I just talked to a man who found out that his closest friend of over 30 years had been dealing with major health issues that he knew nothing about. He expressed a mixture of sadness and hurt that his friend had not told him. We fail to tell what's really going on out of a mixture of shame, fear, and a desire NOT to change.

**Transparency takes place in the light** - John wrote in his letter that we are to walk in the light if we have fellowship with God, since we have been forgiven. The light is where obedience takes place, but also where truthfulness happens. When we lie, we walk in darkness. Walking in the light means we know that we can be forgiven, since Jesus is our Advocate with the Father and propitiation for our sin (1 John 2:1-2). It is our confidence in Jesus' work on the cross that allows us to open up to another. This does not happen with everyone equally, but should happen with some. When there is mutual love and affection, we can deal with our sin and experience the tangible love of someone who can reaffirm and encourage.

**Transparency works best face to face** - Friendships that last the test of time can exist over distances and long periods of time between conversations. However, friendships are best cultivated in a **face to face context**. This allows space to communicate verbally and non-verbally. It allows us to engage in **active listening**, intentional question asking, and loving counsel. Far too often one friend can dominate the conversation and always brings the information back to himself, rather than mutually listening. We've found that listening and asking questions comes out of a genuine love for the person, seeking to know and understand them. Face to face means we can do this over coffee or a meal, or serving together.

All of this is based on the friendship God gave us in Christ. On this Palm Sunday, we are reminded that Jesus entered Jerusalem to die for His friends, to love His bride. It is because we are saved and loved that we can enter into true, loving, sacrificial, faithful, truthful, purposeful, careful, and transparent friendships, to the building up of the body and the strengthening of each other.

#### **Some concluding questions:**

Evaluate your friendships. In what areas are they lacking and thriving?

If you would ask your best friends the purpose of your friendship, what would they say?

When was the last time you had to confront a friend on sin, or that they confronted you? What does that communicate about your friendship?

Do you ask questions and listen to your friends, or is your friendship all about you?

How do we better express love in the friendships we currently have?