

Befriended: Experiencing God's Friendship Various Passages

Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born." Though some natural loners are happy without friends, most of humanity depends greatly on the company of true friends. People tend to befriend those who are similar in background, in personality, and sometimes even appearance, an assortative process that resembles the way in which people select prospective mates. A critical life skill is the ability to establish and maintain strong friendships, while artfully navigating toxic individuals, who may at first be ultra eager to form a friendship.

Strong friendships are a critical aspect of most people's emotional well-being. They can bolster against loneliness, decrease anxiety, and improve one's physical health. When it comes to establishing a friendship, the quality of time spent together proves more important than the quantity. It's not necessary to form a large network of friends: Research shows that sustaining just a few close friendships can provide tremendous benefits.¹

This was quoted from the research page of Psychology Today, which shows that everyone, those inside and outside the church, believe in the necessity of friendship and recognize the problem of loneliness. In fact, in the UK, they have recognized the problem of loneliness is so great they have assigned a Minister of Loneliness, a high ranking government official tasked with helping the Country avoid the depression associated with loneliness² The above quote reveals that friendship is valued but is dependent on finding the right kind of person similar to oneself, while recognizing barriers to friendship exist, such as "toxic" people.

We face several problems when navigating the world of friendship. The **first** is a definition issue. We all want to be connected to those we can share life with, but often we fall short of true friendship and settle for "acquaintanceship", or buddies, or chum's, or pals. We find people that like the same sports team, like the same movies, or travel and we spend time with them, but these tend to stay at the surface of life, rather than diving deep, like snorkeling compared to deep sea diving. We have hundreds of "friends" on Facebook, but this allows us to maintain information, not necessarily relationship.

Second, we have barriers to friendships. We face a culture that is racked with **busyness**, which does not mean we do not have time for friendship, but convinces us we do not. Busyness as a rule keeps us doing lesser things when we do not prioritize the most important things (like prayer and stuff). We are surrounded by growing **technology**, which tends **depersonalize, disengage, and disembodify** relationships and communication. We have immense interaction but low personal contact, constant connection but little physical contact. We also have growing **mobility**, which cuts down on the precious time needed to build healthy friendships.

It is our desire that we grow in our Biblical understanding of what friendship is and looks like, what it takes to build and maintain, and how we take our cue from Jesus Himself in this. Biblical friendship is and should be distinctive from the sentimental pursuit of the world, and should be based on a foundation of God's befriending us through the work of Christ, who made us His friend. These friendships should be born out of love, guided by sacrifice, and mutually pursuant of Christ. This should be a place of deep, honest, open, and true friendship, to be fully known and fully loved, with a

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/friends>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/world/europe/uk-britain-loneliness.html>

willingness to wound and be wounded, to reconcile, forgive, and bear with. It transcends similarities in personality and interests, and though we cannot love everyone in the church to the same degree, should extend to growing levels. So for the next three weeks we will look at where friendship comes from, how to think about it, and how to practice it.

Our Innate Desire for Friendship *Why we need it*

As Created Beings

We were created for relationship, not isolation. **Proverbs 18:1** "*Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment.*" As we review the days of Creation in Genesis 1, we see a pattern appear: **what God made was inherently good** (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), culminating in God looking back at everything He made in six literal days, including man, and said it was **very good** before ceasing from creative activity on the seventh day. Adam was put in the Garden to work and keep it (2:15) given commands for obedience (2:16) and warnings against disobedience (2:17). Then the text says something extraordinary. "*Then the Lord God said, 'It is **not good** that the man should be alone; I will make a helper fit for him.'*" Notice that this all goes down **before sin entered into the world**. Adam was perfect but not complete. He was made to live forever but his state of being alone was NOT GOOD. Even when Adam was given audience to name all the animals, there was nothing in creation that could satisfy this loneliness, not the outdoors, animals, or work. He needed something, or to say it more accurately, he needed someone.

Now it would be rightly argued that God created **marriage** as an institution to solve for loneliness and the need for friendship, and that is true at one level. Eve was certainly the particular helpmate graciously given by God, but it solved a much more general need for all of humanity to be in relationship, to have companionship. It was actually through the union of Adam and Eve that more friends would enter the world. Kent Hughes said, "*While Genesis 2:18 relates directly to the creation of Eve, it is also a primary ontological statement about the nature of man, who is, whether he admits it or not, a relational being. His growth and significance are worked out in relationships.*"

But this begs the question: If we are supposed to secure undivided devotion to the Lord (1 Cor. 7:35; cf. Psalm 73:25-26), and if Adam had a relationship with God in Garden, was not that enough? Why did he need more? The answer comes earlier in Genesis

As Image Bearers

Why is friendship essential? Because we are made in the image of the God who eternally exists as a triune fellowship of love. **Genesis 1:26-27**, "*Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion...So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.'*" God, who is complete in the Godhead made up of three distinct Persons, yet are One, the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. He created mankind in His image, after the plural likeness of the One true God (see, "us", and "our"). "We are made in the image of the God who exists in communal love. This is the deepest reason for friendship. Our nature as God's image bearers, as those he created to represent him and rule over creation, entails friendship. Because of this, God embedded friendship in our DNA."³ Friendship exists because God exists in a love so profound it must be shared. God made us to fully enjoy Him as creatures and to do it together.

³ Drew Hunter, "Made for Friendship", p. 47-48

Friendship, then, is a means to know our God, freeing us to be intentional in them, pursuing others as we pursue our relationship with God in Christ. We thank God **for** friendship, treasuring God **above** friendship, and **enjoying God** through friendship.

How do you view your friendships? Are they means to a greater end? Do they drive you to know and understand God more fully? Do you pursue friendships or are you surrounded by mere acquaintances?

Breakdown of Friendship: Why is it so Hard?

Distortion of the Fall

The Fall of mankind into sin affected all of our relationships. When Adam failed to lead his wife in the truth, protecting her from deception through the clear command God had given him, all the world was plunged into darkness. In fact, sin entered the whole world through Adams sin (Rom. 5:12), with death spreading to all, reigning through and condemning all ((Rom. 5:17-18). This sin meant that an **open, normal, and ongoing relationship with God was over**. Where God would have walked in the Garden normally (Gen. 3:8) without fear, now His presence caused the newlyweds to hide themselves in **fear, ashamed by their nakedness**. Where there was once intimacy and relationship with God, now they were relegated to covering themselves with a provision of animal skins (Gen. 3:21), meaning that something had to die for them to live. This pointed to the inevitable sacrificial system where the blood of goats and calves were shed to cover sin, and the once for all death of Christ, whose blood secured eternal redemption (Heb. 9:12-14).

It also meant that now the relationships that God created for us to **pursue and worship Him** were distorted, no longer defaulting to build each other up to glorify God but pursue self. Friendships now become a means to an end, and the end is how that friend helps me, makes me happy, or satisfies me.

Depravity in our Nature

After hiding themselves, Adam and Eve each had opportunity to show love for God and each other when God confronted them. Adam could have protected his wife by rightfully taking responsibility for their sinful decision, and Eve could have respected her husband by deferring to her husband. But instead, they did what so many of us do: they defended themselves, shifting the blame to others (God, wife, devil), instead of accepting responsibility and realizing culpability. Our post-sin nature now is characterized by **selfishness** rather than selflessness, **self-preservation** rather than sacrifice, **self-love** rather than a love that's willing to lay down one's life.

Jonathan Holmes says, *"we see how sin has affected our pursuit of friends. It taints our motivations before we even pursue someone else. Do they like me? Can I make them like me? Will they accept me? Will they love me? What will they give me? What are they expecting from me? Will they hurt me? These questions are not inherently bad or evil, but notice how they are all **utterly self-referential. Me, me, me ---God and his purposes are woefully absent. In other words, due to the inward-curving effects of sin, we often pursue friendship not out of a biblical understanding of bearing God's image and glorifying his all-encompassing gospel, but out of a desire for personal benefit.**"*⁴

Restoration of Friendship: How do we get it?

God's Work in Redemption

⁴ Jonathan Holmes, *"The Company We Keep: In search of biblical friendship"*, p. 23-24

How is friendship redeemed? How do we overcome what's stacked against us? The answer is looking back and up to how God has loved and befriended us. The whole of Biblical teaching on God's friendship can be summed up this way: **God walked with us in friendship ---- we walked away (in sin) ---- now He befriends us again.**⁵ What does this mean and look like?

God created us out of an overflow of His love - As Jesus marched toward the cross, he was troubled at the prospect of becoming a curse for us, and desired greatly to be with His friends (Luke 22:15), to pray for them (Luke 22:32) and with them (22:40). After leaving the upper room with Judas leaving to betray him and the clock ticking, He began to pray to His Father, what we call the High Priestly prayer. It is in this prayer that He defined eternal life relationally with Him (John 17:3), knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He sent. He prayed for unity for the disciples (17:11) which flowed out of the unity of the Godhead, and that they would be filled with joy (17:13). He then prayed for us, or those disciples that would come after the 12. **John 17:24** "*Father I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.*" Do you see it? Creation exists as an overflow of the love that was shared eternally between God Himself. God created the world to share that love with humanity as a spring that overflows with a torrent of sweet, life giving water. God did not need to create us to seek happiness or satisfaction, since He was already perfectly loving within Himself. But He desired to have the communion He shared to overflow to us. **John 17:26**, "*I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them.*"

God saved us to befriend us again - As the overarching plan of redemption before the world even began, God set in motion a perfect plan to buy us back, to bring us back in a relationship with Him. It is noted that He referenced those through whom He worked as His "friends". **Noah** walked with God (Gen. 6:9), **Abraham** was called God's friend (Isaiah 41:8, 2 Chron. 20:7; James 2:23) and it was through Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed. **Moses** was said to speak to God face to face, as a man speaks to a friend (Ex. 33:11; Deut. 34:10). These friendships created a thread that lead to the ultimate expression and example of friendship in Jesus.

Christ's Work of Glorious Love (John 15:12-17)

*"This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone **lay down his life for his friends**. **You are my friends** if you do what I command you.*

*No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but **I have called you friends**, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will **love one another.**"*

Before His high priestly prayer, Jesus stated something that the disciples had never heard nor imagined they would ever hear. The Messiah called them friends. He embodies friendship with us so that we can befriend others, meaning as we understand the breadth and height of His friendship, we can understand the nature of Biblical friendship. However, we must understand the limits of this friendship:

*"Although there is a sense in which Jesus gives his life for the world, there is another in which he dies for his friends. **Who then are his friends?** 'You are my friends if you do what I command.' This obedience is **not what makes them friends; it is what characterizes friends**. Clearly, then, this 'friendship is not reciprocal: these friends of Jesus*

⁵ Hunter, p. 122

*cannot turn around and say that Jesus will be their friend if he does what they say. Although Abraham and Moses are called **friends of God**, **God is never called their friend**; although Jesus can call Lazarus a friend (John 11:11) Jesus is not called the friend of Lazarus, nor is Jesus ever referred to in Scripture as the 'friend' of anyone."⁶*

1. Love is the foundation of all true friendship (15:12) - In John 13, Jesus called loving each other a new command. This was not new in the sense that it could not be found in the OT, but because it came with the qualifier to love **as I have loved you**. Jesus is our model of true loving friendship, as He is the example of loving husbandry in marriage. Love is focused on the good of the other, denies self, and is rooted in a free choice that a believer can make. Jesus called his rag-tag group of disciples to love each other so the world would see it and know they were His because it would be **so completely counter-cultural**. The disciples were not men who had common personalities or interests, but they simply had the same Savior that freed them to love each other as friends.

2. Loving sacrifice is required for friendship (15:13)- Love demands sacrifice. Jesus demonstrated this by laying down His life freely, knowing that no one took it from Him (John 10:11,15). Jesus substituted Himself on the cross for us, taking God's wrath on Himself to justify us (declared righteous), so that we could be reconciled to the Father. **He saves us to befriend us**. Puritan Walter Marshall (no joke) said "*Justification is God's way of taking you into friendship with himself*". Far too often we lack deep friendships because we are unwilling to die to ourselves and serve through sacrifice. The way to love this way is to know and understand Jesus' death on our behalf so that we can freely deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Christ.

3. God's glory is the goal of friendship (15:15) - We never stop being servants, since that is who we are (Luke 17:10), but we are no longer only servants but are considered friends. The distinct difference is that a friend is let in on the story, receiving information about the "why" of what is going on. **"Nothing reveals God's glory more than the dying love of Christ. To understand the blazing center of God's glory, we look at the cross, where the Son of God laid his life down for his friends. This is love. This is beauty. This is his greatest glory."**⁷ The cross is the means by which we can enter into real and true friendship and becomes the purpose and mission of our friendships.

4. God's sovereign grace is our security in friendship - We experience friendship with God because He chose us. We did not choose Him. This is the best kind of news since we were objects of His love NOT because of our loveliness, but because of His free choice to place his love on us. Because we are eternally loved, never being loved less and we can't be loved more, we can love others out of an outflow of that choice. We are secure in the love that Christ gives us, so we can love those who are different, who are difficult, who are hard for us. Friendships become the ultimate expression of Godly love, not of selfish affinity.

Is this how you've been approaching friendship? Have you been judging friendship based on what you can get or what you can give? Are your friendships a reflection of worldly standards or a declaration of the newness of the gospel which frees us to love our friends deeply, openly, honestly, and relentlessly.

Conclusion:

We celebrated communion today, which is appropriate in our discussion of friendship. The eternal love and fellowship that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit enjoyed was broken, as the Father judiciously dis-

⁶ D. A. Carson, "The Gospel of John", p. 522

⁷ Hunter. p. 132.

fellowshipped the Son on the cross, so that we could enter into a complete, whole, joyful relationship with Him.

*"This is what makes biblical friendship distinct from the world's sentimental approximations: Jesus at the center. For not only is he the center, he also gives us the power to follow his example and **befriend others**. This embodied friendship, centered on Jesus, flows into every area of life. **Friendship ceases to be primarily something we do, and instead transforms into something we become as we follow Christ.** When we embody biblical friendship, we bear Jesus' image, his character, his priorities, his glory. **No longer will our friendships be situated merely around common circumstances or interests, but will instead become an embodied commitment to live out the image of God together in every area of our life.**"⁸*

⁸ Jonathan Holmes, *"The Company We Keep: In Search of Biblical Friendship"*, p. 25-26