

Christlike Friendship

¹² This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. ¹⁵ No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you. ¹⁷ These things I command you, that you love one another. (John 15:12–17)

During the Covid-19 pandemic everyone experienced some degree of loneliness, isolation. But it didn't really begin or end with the pandemic. Loneliness is an epidemic of its own in our world. In a world where we are more and more connected to more and more people through the internet, strangely enough, people report feeling more and more alone. The WHO has claimed loneliness is becoming a pressing health concern, including a 50% increased risk of developing dementia, a 30% increased risk of stroke. Even though people now have hordes of people they chat with online, tonnes of followers, likes, subscribers, and 'friends' online, people are still haunted by, and chilled by a profound loneliness.

People live behind their screens, live in bigger and bigger cities, where you are more and more anonymous, lost in the crowd, surrounded by people but without community or friendship. I can be more and more self-centred in my digital world, and more and more isolated from real relationships.

That's because the more our technology allows us to connect with other people through screens and devices, the less we seem to cultivate flesh and blood relationships. And we can't get away from the fact that it fall short of true, living friendship.

Though the technology has changed, the longing for face-to-face friendship is nothing new. In fact, Scripture itself has it.

Having many things to write to you, I did not wish *to do so* with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full. (2 John 12) . He says the same thing at the end of 3 John.

But we were made for companionship. In Genesis 2:18, God said, it is not good that man should be alone. We're made to live in family, and friendship, and community.

And friendship becomes even more important when you become a believer in Christ. Once you repent of your sins and of living under your own lordship, and you accept Christ and His crosswork on your behalf, you now come into a union with Him that places you in opposition to the rest of the world. James asks us “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. (James 4:4) The apostle John says, “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” (1 John 2:15).

And as Jesus tells us in this Upper Room Discourse we're studying, once you are in Christ, and Christ is in you, the world hates you, they feel judged and convicted by you, and they will either try to convert you back to their unbelief, or persecute you for your belief.

That increases the sense of loneliness, and isolation. All the more reason for friendship among God's people.

Jesus addresses this vital part of the Christian life here in this multi-chapter lesson on the Christian life. We've already seen that Jesus began this whole discourse by giving a new commandment, that

we love one another. ³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34–35)

As Jesus continues to teach about the Christian life, about the Word dwelling in us by the Spirit, about communing with God in prayer, and conforming our wills to His in obedience, He keeps returning to the matter of loving one another. Having given us the greatest picture of the Christian life, the vine and its branches, Jesus returns to the theme of our relationship with each other. Lest we think the Christian life is a solitary affair, abiding with Christ alone on a mountaintop, Jesus makes this life of bearing fruit inseparable from a life of spiritual friendship with other Christians.

Christians should not live lives of friendless isolation. The local church should not be a collection of polite and pleasant acquaintances who meet in one location to hear a sermon. Christians should be cultivating and experiencing true friendship-love with one another.

So what we have in this passage is Jesus teaching us what Christlike friendship is.

Notice how verse 12 and verse 17 say the same thing, and serve like the bookends, like the bread sandwiching everything else.

This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. (John 15:12)

These things I command you, that you love one another. (John 15:17)

In the verses in between 12 and 17, He will show us what that looks like. Christ regards us as His friends, and calls on us to treat each other with the same friendship.

Christlike friendship may not look like what the world has been teaching us about friendship.

He is going to show us what sort of friend He has been to us, and then call us to be that to each other. Verse 13 will give us our first attribute of Christlike friendship, verses 14 and 15 our second, and verse 16, our third. Three actions of real Christlike friendship from Him to us, meant then to be shared with one another.

I. Christlike Friendship Sacrifices Willingly

¹³ Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

As Jesus says these words, we know something that the disciples did not. We know that just a few hours after saying this, Jesus would be literally laying down His life for His friends on the cross. He is going to pay the ultimate price: separation from God on the cross so as to pay the penalty of sin for His friends.

By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren. (1 John 3:16)

Jesus says, this is friendship love at its highest, when your love for your friend would lead you to even give up your life, which means giving up experiencing that friendship, for the sake and good of your friend.

Here in this one verse are two Greek words for love: *agape*, and the noun form of *phileo*, the word for friends. *Phileo* is the brotherhood of friendship, while *agape* is the sacrificial love for the good the other. Here Jesus melds them together, they are not completely different ideas.

Christlike friendship is built on *agape* love: sacrifice. I give up, that my friend may gain. I give up

what I would keep for myself, time, money, privacy, convenience to either share, or give away altogether. Remaining loyal is one of those sacrifices, to not be a fair-weather friend.

¹⁷ A friend loves at all times, And a brother is born for adversity. (Proverbs 17:17)

We remember the most famous friendship of the Bible: Jonathan and David. And as Jonathan and David grew closer, we read, “⁴ And Jonathan took off the robe that *was* on him and gave it to David, with his armor, even to his sword and his bow and his belt. (1 Samuel 18:4)

This was in a time when the Philistines had such control over Israel that they had prevented the nation from producing swords. Jonathan's was one of the few swords in the country. By giving up his robe and armour, he was even sacrificing his right to be the heir to the throne. He was recognising David's election as the next true king. Jonathan goes on to make sacrifice after sacrifice for his friend, sacrificing his favour with his father to protect David, sacrificing his own life in a battle he knows he cannot win because God has forsaken his father Saul.

The basic ingredient for a real friendship is sacrificial kindness. Sacrificial kindness is the polar opposite of selfishness. Selfishness distorts the very idea of friendship. People become friendship connoisseurs, sampling people for if they come up to their standards. And they keep finding, surprise, surprise, that they don't.

R. Kent Hughes tells the story of “A wise old farmer was working beside the road when a family moving to a nearby town stopped and asked him if that town was “friendly.” The farmer said he could not really say. But the people pressed him for an answer, so he asked them what the town was like that they came from. They answered that it was terrible — the people were rude and small-minded. The old farmer replied, “That is just how you will find this town.”

That's what happens to the inwardly focused person who only wants to receive, but not sacrifice. They want friends, but they are not willing to be a friend.

²⁴ A man *who has* friends must himself be friendly, But there is a friend *who* sticks closer than a brother. (Proverbs 18:24)

Christian, Christlike friendship, always begins with sacrifice. Some death to my comfort, my preference, my convenience. Some cost I must absorb. Go out of your comfort zone. Give up one evening in your week for a month or two to do a Bible study with that new couple or family that are attending. Give up part of your Saturday for a weekly breakfast with a younger Christian and go through a book together. Give up some of your grocery budget and have someone over. Give up the comfort of sticking with your favourites every Sunday and invest in some conversations with others. Embrace some awkwardness as you show friendliness to ages or ethnicities not your own.

II. Christlike Friendship Serves Thoughtfully

¹⁴ You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. ⁵ No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.

The next thing we understand about friendship is that friends serve each other with open fellowship. Friends meet each other needs, not mindlessly or grudgingly, but with full understanding.

Jesus says that if His disciples obey His Word, and seek to please Him, He regards them as friends. This is similar to what He said about family:

For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother.” (Matthew 12:50)

It is not that serving and obeying *makes* us His friends, but obeying characterises them as friends. This is what friends do. But lest we think that this kind of service sounds more like the army, or like menial employment than like friendship, Jesus explains why this kind of service is friendship in verse 15. In verse 15 He says, I don't call you or regard you as slaves. Slaves do not obey because their master has brought them into the inner circle of knowledge. Slaves obey because they are the property of their owners. They do what they are told because a slave is not in a friendship with his master. He is more like a human tool, an instrument. And even today, people at the bottom of the totem pole in a business do not know what the directors, or the owners are doing. They just do what they're told, because that's the job.

But in friendship, you're brought into the know. When friends serve and help each other, it's because they've told each other what they need, and why, and how to go about it.

We remember that God spoke of Abraham in these words, ⁸ "But you, Israel, *are* My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, The descendants of Abraham My friend. (Isaiah 41:8)
And it was just before the destruction of Sodom, that we read God saying this "Shall I hide from Abraham that which I do?" God brought Abraham into His counsels.

Jesus says, in His service, He does not treat us as mindless slaves labouring under His lash. Instead, He has filled a rather thick book called the Word with explanations, promises, commands, reasons. God has told us vast amounts about what He has done in the past, what He is doing now, and what He will do in the future. He has given us instructions, but He has given us motives to obey those instructions, given us means and empowerment to obey, offered as rewards for obedience, and explained the consequences of obedience and disobedience.

Friendship is distinguished from enforced servitude by the willing disclosure of plans and purposes to each other, and then through the fully informed service of each other.

I can only serve you as a friend if I know you. And I can only know you, if you let me know you. Real service is meeting real needs. Real needs. One of the native American words for friendship was "one-who-carries-my-sorrows-on-his-back."

Real needs require real openness.

It is the temptation of every church, of every Christian to lapse into superficial care with shallow openness. We can become those people who are nice and friendly, but not friends. We keep our cards close to our chest, and don't let people in. When people ask us, we give them niceties, cliches, or some Christianese.

So what would you call it if you encountered someone who wanted people at arm's length, who didn't want help. And when questioned, they said "I don't want others in my business" or I don't want "interference" - what would you call that? I think without any help from a theological dictionary, you'd call that pride. "A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; He rages against all wise judgment. (Proverbs 18:1). It's selfish self-protectiveness to refuse the gestures of friendship from others.

To be a friend is to risk. Risk-free friendship does not exist. C. S. Lewis: "There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to

no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.”

The basic definition of fellowship is to know and be known. Friendship is serving the other in a relationship of openness. Sacrificing willingly. Serving thoughtfully.

III. Christlike Friendship Sanctifies Deliberately

16 You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you.

Lest the disciples mistake what Jesus means, and think there's total equality between Jesus and them, Jesus reminds them, this wasn't a symmetrical relationship. You didn't choose Me. In the first century, disciples usually did choose the rabbi they would follow. But in their case, Jesus had called them all out of the vocations they were in to follow Him. He took the initiative.

¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

He chose them, and He appointed them, so that they would bear the fruit he talked about in the image of the vine and the branches. They would abide in Him, be filled with His Word and become like Christ, and bring others to Christ.

And as we saw, if disciples abide, they end up doing two things: they pray and they obey. So Jesus says He chose them so that they would experience this fullness of joy in which you pray in His name and experience answers.

Jesus had a purpose in mind for these men when He chose them. He wanted the very best for them. He knew it would include great pruning and great suffering, but He knew it would bring them the greatest thing in the world: Christlikeness and the fullness of joy it brings. He set them apart, which is the meaning of sanctify, so that they would experience the blessing.

Jesus was not the sort of friend who let these men waste their lives. He didn't shrug and look the other way. He didn't say, “I don't want to seem judgemental”. No, He spoke truth to them, so that they could truly have the best life they could possibly have.

Friends are willing to seek the good of their friend, even if it hurts.

⁶ Faithful *are* the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy *are* deceitful. (Proverbs 27:6)

⁹ Ointment and perfume delight the heart, And the sweetness of a man's friend *gives delight* by hearty counsel. (Proverbs 27:9)

“I would do many things to please my friends; but to go to hell to please them is more than I would venture. It may be very well to do this and that for good fellowship; but it will never do to lose the friendship of God in order to keep on good terms with men.” CHARLES SPURGEON

Do you speak the truth in love to other Christians? Do you guide them towards good resources? Do you remind them of Scripture? Do you follow up with them if you don't see them at church? Do you encourage other believers to draw near to Christ?

17 As iron sharpens iron, So a man sharpens the countenance of his friend. (Proverbs 27:17)

In *Pilgrim's Progress*, there is the description of Christian and Faithful's friendship: "I saw in my dream they went very lovingly on together, and had sweet conversation of all things that had happened to them in their pilgrimage."

Did you ever think that Jesus did not choose twelve men who were already friends to be His apostles? Far from it. He chose some from Galilee, but some others from other parts of the country, and north and south didn't get along. He chose James and John who were sons of thunder rushing in where angels fear to tread, and then he chose doubting Thomas, who wouldn't believe something unless he saw it. How easy was it for them to get along?

You had prejudiced Nathanael who blurts out "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Peter who is always blurting out what comes into his head.

You have Matthew who had betrayed his own nation to the Romans to become a tax collector, an employee of the Roman empire, and then you had Simon the Zealot. The Zealots, or Sicarii, were a political revolutionary group trained in war and combat, who assassinated and killed Romans, seeking to overthrow them by force and bring in the Messianic kingdom. How do you think Simon and Matthew got along?

There was nothing natural about these men becoming friends. It had to be hard for those men to sacrifice money, and energy, and time away from family to know each other. It had to be difficult for these very different men to being to open up to each other about their fears, their sins, their struggles, their failures, their hopes. It had to be hard to learn to wash the feet of men you didn't really choose to be with. And it had to be hard to seek each other's spiritual good, pray for and with each other, speak truth to each other. He has loved us, He has told us to love one another as He loved us.

To sacrifice willingly, to serve thoughtfully, to sanctify deliberately, could only be because they looked at Jesus and said – He has been a friend to us in these ways, can we do less?

That's the same conclusion you and I must come to as we read His Words and then look around us in this very room.