



The Gift of Friendship

| *What can we learn about friendships from the Bible and from people who nurture friendships well?*

Introduction

Loneliness and isolation are increasingly common in our culture. Every month or two, a newspaper article or TV show highlights this topic. We're told that, on average, fewer people live in each home. People eat more meals alone and say they have fewer friends and family members with whom they can talk honestly.

Is friendship a dying art? Are we doomed to isolation?

The Christian faith offers a place of community, and the Bible teaches much about relationships that can help us be loyal friends. We can learn from the biblical stories that portray diverse friendships as well as from the guidelines for relationships that are found in numerous biblical passages.

And despite growing isolation in our culture, many people have a wide circle of friends. We can also learn from them. Several members of my extended family excel at friendships, and this lesson grows out of my conversations with them as well as my study of the Bible.

This session is structured around common myths about friendships. Often the myths we believe about friendships keep us from engaging realistically in friendships. Myths can also keep us from appreciating the friends we do have.

Myth 1: Friendships Happen Automatically

One of the loveliest friendships in the Bible is described in Luke 1:39–56. Mary has been visited by an angel, who has told her she will bear a child by the power of the Holy Spirit. The angel also has told her that her



Friendships take work.

cousin Elizabeth is going to bear a child in her old age, evidence that nothing is impossible with God.

Elizabeth lived some distance from Mary, probably several days' journey on foot. Soon after the angel's visit, Mary set off to visit Elizabeth. When Mary arrived, the baby in Elizabeth's womb "leaped for joy" (Luke 1:44). This manifests the significant connection Elizabeth's child, John the Baptist, would have with Mary's child, Jesus.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months. Both of them were pregnant with miracle babies, and they undoubtedly had a great deal to talk about.

This friendship, based on a powerful, shared experience, would not have happened if Mary hadn't gone to visit Elizabeth. The angel did not direct her to do so; the angel merely cited Elizabeth as an example of another person who had conceived a baby in a miraculous way.

We often believe that friendships happen spontaneously and naturally, with little effort on our part. In reality, though, almost all relational connections involve deliberate action on someone's part. That was true in Mary and Elizabeth's time, and it is true today. The people I know who are masters at friendship are always

taking initiative in some way with their friends. They call, e-mail, and visit their friends. They make time to get together. When a friend comes to mind, they make contact. They don't spend a lot of time thinking, "I wonder why he or she hasn't contacted me."

The apostle Paul writes, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). People who excel at friendship remember the concerns their friends have mentioned. They take initiative—by phone, by e-mail, or in person—to ask what happened at the interview, the doctor's visit, the funeral, or the sports event that their friend was concerned about. They pray for their friends and ask about the answers to those prayers.

The angel mentioned Elizabeth to Mary, and Mary set out to visit Elizabeth. That kind of initiative makes friendships happen and keeps friendships alive.

Myth 2: All Friendships Are Deeply Intimate

Many of us long for the perfect, loyal friend—a "heart friend" or "soul friend"—with whom we can talk about anything. Jonathan and David's friendship, described in 1 Samuel 18–20, was intimate and heartfelt. They were bound to each other's souls after swearing an oath of friendship to each other.

Jonathan was the oldest son of King Saul and might have expected to be the next king of Israel. But when God made clear that David would be the next king, Jonathan remained loyal to him and even jeopardized his own life to protect David. The depth of intimacy and loyalty that David and Jonathan expressed to each other seems admirable and enviable to us in our isolated culture.

Sometimes we get to have friendships like theirs. Those heart friends or soul friends are a great gift. However, many friendships are much more limited. Many friendships arise from common experiences, like Mary and Elizabeth's friendship, which can feel less desirable because we are longing for something more intense.

Some friendships revolve around shared work or common hobbies. Other friendships arise from seemingly random aspects of our lives, such as living in the same neighborhood, having the same kind of dog, or having relatives who know one another. Most friendships

begin with one or two connection points and lack deep heartfelt intimacy, particularly in the beginning. People who excel at friendship consider each friendship to be precious and valuable. They treasure each friendship for what it is, even if deep intimacy is lacking.

Paul writes, "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (Col. 3:12). Compassion and kindness enable us to make connections with people who share part of our life journey, even if they are not soul friends. Compassion and kindness give us the ability to ask questions about the well-being of people we meet and to listen carefully to their answers. Compassion and kindness move us to take initiative to care for others, which can begin a friendship and which nurtures existing friendships.

Humility and meekness help us to be grateful for all the people with whom we have contact. We don't have a right to have friends; they are a wonderful gift. Humility and meekness enable us to be grateful for that gift.

Patience helps us accept relationships for what they are, enabling us to receive what people are able to give us rather than always wishing for more. Patience plays a role in allowing friendships to grow slowly over time.

Myth 3: All Friendships Should Be Equal Partnerships

In childhood I almost always had one best friend. Because my family moved a lot, I had different best friends at different ages. They were always my own age, my own ethnicity, and my own gender. In most cases, they were soul friends with whom I shared my dreams and hopes. These best friends were my peers. In many ways we were equal partners.

The Bible has numerous stories of people who appear to have been friends, but who were not equal partners. Circumstances or a shared mission brought them together, and they were loyal and faithful to each other. These stories have challenged me to be more open to friendships in unexpected places.

The friendship between Ruth and Naomi, described in the book of Ruth, was a friendship that arose from a specific circumstance. Ruth was Naomi's daughter-in-law, and Ruth's loyalty to Naomi is often quoted: "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge;

your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16).

Ruth’s husband had died, and Naomi guided Ruth in finding another husband. Ruth listened to Naomi’s advice, respecting her guidance. In the midst of this relationship of mother-in-law to daughter-in-law, there was genuine love and affection.

Elisha was called by God to be a prophet and to take on Elijah’s role. At first Elisha was Elijah’s servant (1 Kgs. 19:19–21). Later, Elijah was a mentor and teacher to Elisha. When Elijah knew God was going to take him into heaven, he asked Elisha to wait behind, but Elisha said three times, “I will not leave you” (2 Kgs. 2:1–18), a close parallel to Ruth’s words. Even though these two men began their relationship in the roles of master and servant, the real tenderness Elisha felt for Elijah is evident in those last moments of Elijah’s life on earth.

The relationship between Paul and Barnabas, described in the book of Acts, is another friendship that is not an equal partnership. Paul had a special calling to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, and Barnabas was a partner in that mission, but Paul remained in the primary role.

Barnabas advocated for Paul after Paul’s conversion (Acts 9), traveled with Paul and preached the Gospel (Acts 13–14), and stood with Paul at the challenging Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). Barnabas’s real name was Joseph, but he received his nickname “Barnabas”—which means “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36)—because of his character. His role as encourager is evident in Acts 11:22–26, when he saw God’s grace at work in the growth of the church in Antioch and “exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion.”

We can only guess how much Paul depended on Barnabas and benefited from his encouragement. Even though Paul was most often in the leadership role and Barnabas was the encourager, the bond between the two men was evident.

These three friendships—Ruth and Naomi, Elisha and Elijah, and Paul and Barnabas—can give us encouragement to enjoy friendships that are not equal partnerships. In our world, these friendships might be with a boss, an employee, a mentor, a mentee, an older or younger relative, or someone in Christian leadership. There will usually be limits to these friendships because of the different roles involved, but some degree of friendship



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can be present. If so, the friendship can be treasured and honored for the gift that it is.

Myth 4: Friendship Is Easy

In our complex, fast-paced culture, taking the time and energy for nurturing friendships does not come easily for many of us. We’re tired after work. We’re frazzled from commuting. We’re overloaded from electronic stimulation. Zoning out feels more appealing than picking up the phone and calling a friend. Yet many of us long for deeper and more meaningful friendships.

People who excel at friendship say that the investments they make in their friendships are worth it. One of my relatives who has a close circle of friends says that he consciously nurtures his friendships. “I go out of my way to see my friends even when it’s inconvenient for me. I’m proactive in my relationships with friends. Sometimes friendship is work, but nurturing friendships is part of how I strive for balance in my life.”

He reflects on his earlier years in high school and early adulthood, when friendships came easily. Someone was always calling and asking him to do something fun. Spur-of-the-moment activities were easy to arrange. As he has gotten older, he has realized he has to be more intentional in order to have friends. He has to make time for them, often scheduling events well in advance. He has to invite them to do things with him in those windows of time he knows he has free.

A spontaneous, free-flowing pattern of relationships doesn’t work as well for him these days, in the midst of family and professional responsibilities. Now he has to be intentional and make sacrifices to nurture his friendships, but he believes his friendships are part of how he engages in self-care. His own well-being depends on his friendships.

Myth 5: Our Relationship with God Has Nothing to Do with Friendship

The Bible uses many metaphors to describe our relationship with God. God is often referred to as Father and sometimes pictured as Mother. God is called Lord, Rock, Fortress, and other words that communicate strength and safety. God is our Shepherd, the one who guides us, feeds us, protects us, and binds up our wounds. All of these beautiful pictures or metaphors for God teach us about aspects of God's character and reveal different ways God loves us.

Jesus said that he is also our friend: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (John 15:13–15).

This friendship with Jesus is not an equal partnership. We are Jesus' friends if we obey him, something that is not common in human friendships. Yet Jesus laid down his life for us, his friends, and he has revealed to us what he heard from God. This friendship with Jesus shows more intimacy than the Rock and Fortress metaphors for God.

Because Jesus has revealed many things to us about God's priorities in the world, we are invited into ministry in this hurting world as Jesus' friends. We are invited to share Jesus' priorities and concerns. We are invited to stand beside Jesus as he serves in our world.

This friendship with Jesus can teach us about friendships with other people. Jesus modeled kindness, compassion, humility, meekness, and patience, yet he was also forthright and honest. He spoke hard truths when necessary. He was sensitive to the needs of people around him without losing sight of his own priorities and values. As we grow in friendship with Jesus, we will grow in our ability to be friends with people.

Friendships Today

These myths about friendship reveal some of the tensions between the ideal and the real in friendships. Additional tensions exist in friendships, and it can be helpful to acknowledge these challenges:

- *Independence/dependence.* In any friendship, the friends are independent of each other in some areas and dependent on each other in other areas. In most long friendships, the areas of dependence and independence shift over time. In some friendships, the two friends have different needs in the area of independence and dependence, and it can be challenging to navigate the different needs in this area.
- *Affection/instrumentality.* Friends often have to navigate a balance between valuing the friend as an end in itself versus valuing the friend as a means to another end, such as getting help with a specific need, sharing in an activity that requires two people, or receiving emotional support. Have I asked for help too often recently? Is it time to sit back and simply enjoy my friend for who he or she is? When and how much to ask for help can be another challenge in friendship.
- *Judgment/acceptance.* We expect our friends to accept us as we are, but we also expect some level of honesty and some amount of advice when needed. Friends need to develop patterns of honesty and forthrightness that are well supported by an atmosphere of acceptance and affection.

God cares deeply about our relationships and is eager to help us engage in healthy relationships. God's help often comes through prayer. We can ask for God's help as we navigate these challenges in friendships. The biblical passages mentioned earlier, Galatians 6:2 and Colossians 3:12, can be helpful in praying for friendships. First Corinthians 13:1–7, the famous love passage, is another helpful passage to pray from. We can ask God to help us live out those truths in our friendships.

Jesus asks a significant question after telling the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). He told the parable in response to a question, "Who is my neighbor?" (v. 29). After telling the story of the Samaritan who took care of a man who had been beaten and robbed, Jesus asks, "Which of these . . . was a neighbor to the man?" (v. 36). He changes the focus from identifying who is our neighbor to being a neighbor. In the same way, God invites us to be a friend rather than figure out who is our friend.

About the Writer

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