

LIFE-GIVING FRIENDS

We are not afraid of the darkness ... for Jesus is the Light of the world! Easter people, do not fear the valley of the shadow of death, for Jesus has conquered death and He will walk us through it. He is our eternal Savior and Friend. Christ has risen! He has risen indeed!

Most of us realize that our relationships are important. Relationships with family, friends, coworkers, and church family are unavoidable and, in many cases, essential. Ideally, they would be life giving relationships. Unfortunately, all too often, they can be life-draining, or broken, or even toxic. In fact, there are some relationships that are to be avoided altogether. Nevertheless, the vast majority of our relationships can be good ones. I've been talking for weeks about life-giving relationships: parents, spouses, children. Last week Rev. Thornton spoke on the "Life Giving Word" – which is really the foundation for the true, full life that God offers. Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, is the supreme lifer-giver and so our relationship to Him is vital. When we confess Him as our Savior, He begins to work through us, so that we become life-givers and our relationships can be life-giving.

Today I would like to share some thoughts on life-giving friends and friendships.

The Value of a Friend

When we read the words of Solomon in Ecclesiastes (4:9-12) we find words of wisdom for all of us who live on this sometimes, lonely earth, wondering how to survive, how to make life better, how to get along, even when circumstances are not so good. The writer of Ecclesiastes wants us to understand that friendship is a good investment.

Two are better than one, because they have good reward for their labor, Eccl. 4:9. The words "good reward" can also be translated "good return" as in dividends paid on a wise investment. Some people spend their lives trying accumulate possessions: "He who dies with most toys wins." But *things* never truly make you happy and fulfilled. The very best investment you will ever make in life will not be a financial one. Making friends and being a friend are the best long-term investments we can make. A young man went off to a large city and soon found his expenses exceeding his income. He texted his father, "Dear Father, I am in the city. I'm broke and have no friends. What shall I do?" His Father texted back, "Dear son: Make some friends quick!"

Relationships bring us the most joy (and the most pain when they're not right). *Do not forsake your friend and the friend of your father, and do not go to your brother's house when disaster strikes you-- better a neighbor nearby than a brother far away, Proverbs 27:10.* Let's look at four characteristics of a real friend.

1. A Real Friend Helps You When You're Down. *For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, For he has no one to help him up, Eccl. 4:10.* You may have a lot of people in your life you could call acquaintances. But you may only have a very few that you could term "real friends." Who you gonna call in a time of need?

Some one has suggested that we have been successful in life if we have enough close friends to act as pallbearers at our funeral. How can I tell the difference between acquaintances and friends? That's easy: just get in trouble - the people that are still around are your real friends (how many would it be?).

A friend is the kind of person that if you call them at 2:00 in the morning and tell them you need help, they don't reply, "So what's the problem?" and then decide whether or not to come. The true friend simply asks, "Where are you?" as they are getting dressed. How many people do you have like that in your life? *A friend loves at all times, And a brother is born for adversity, Proverbs 17:17.* A real friend helps you when you are down.

2. A Real Friend Is Someone Who Provides Emotional or Physical Warmth In A Cold World. Sometimes we have a tendency to take a thought so literally that we miss the point of the whole idea. This is more than just about keeping each other physically warm. We need help to face circumstances beyond our control; we need to be able to gain emotional strength when we do not have enough of our own. Sometimes it's cold out there in the world. There are circumstances we face and ask, "How am I going to make it through this right now?!" That's when we need a friend to give us emotional strength.

The reality of life is that we encounter people who drain us emotionally- some all the way to empty. Then there are other folks who fill our emotional tanks - being around them fills us. There are two kinds of people in the world: encouragers and discouragers, which group are you in? I find that most people who are discouragers don't know it. Just look at what you say. If you're always setting someone straight, or pointing out what's wrong with them or their performance, you may be a discourager. Why not be an encourager today - looking for what's good and right in others? A true friend is someone who provides emotional or physical warmth in a cold world.

3. A Real Friend Is Someone Who Will Fight To Protect You Or Your Reputation. *Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him, Eccl. 4:12.* Ever hear that saying, "I've got your back?" When Ecclesiastes was written almost all military encounters involved hand-to-hand combat. Soldiers went into battle with a partner, someone that could be counted on and trusted implicitly. They always kept their backs in contact and fought whatever enemy came from any side.

Friends not only never stab you in the back, they guard your back. A friend never puts up with gossip about their friends. Here's how you respond to gossip: "He/she is a friend of mine. I don't need to hear this." A true friend is someone who will fight to protect you or your reputation.

4. A Real Friend Is Committed To Helping You Grow Spiritually. The greatest gift you can give someone is the gift of an invitation to a relationship with God. Some of you are here today because a friend invited you. Even if you think your friend is a little too serious about "religion" and God, they are a true friend because they are letting you know of the greatest gift anyone could ever get: forgiveness for your sin, a personal relationship with God, and a place in heaven forever. If you have not accepted Christ personally into your life, I invite you to do so today.

True friends want to see us continue to grow. *As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another, Proverbs 27:17.* Friends are always challenging us and even pushing

us to be all that God wants for us to be. If you really want friends like that, start being such a friend yourself.

Those four traits make for solid friends. You may be saying to yourself, “I wish I had a friend like that!” You can! The second half of Proverbs 18:24 says this: *But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.*

The Truest Friend

Men and women across the world ask – consciously and unconsciously - “Where can I find a friend? How can I find someone who cares for me?” That might seem an unlikely question. After all we live in a city of over 400,000 and we have all kinds of ways to communicate and share on social media. How can anyone be lonely?

But even with social media it’s not hard to understand why people get lonely. We’re all in the fast lane now—get up, get dressed, go to work, come home, unwind, eat supper, watch TV, go to bed, get up tomorrow morning and do it all over again. We struggle to really get to know our neighbors. We put up fences, shrubs and security systems to protect our privacy. People move in and out so fast that we hardly knew they were here, much less that they moved away. Thousands of people in Kern County go to bed each night with burdens and cares and heavy hearts, and no one to lean on.

Some people wonder what Hell will be like. T. S. Eliot calls it the “Great Void,” the land of nothingness. Imagine it as the one place in the universe where you are utterly, totally, and eternally alone. You scream and no one answers. You cry for help but no one hears your voice. You are utterly alone. Against that awful reality stand the words of Jesus, *I am with you always*, Matthew 28:20. Easter answers one of life’s most important questions: the question of loneliness. He said those words on this side of the Empty Tomb - after He had already come back from the dead. Those words have meaning only if Jesus is alive. If Easter did not happen, then Jesus is not with us, and we are truly alone.

Yet because He did indeed rise from death, He lives today and will be with us forever. The Lord Jesus says to us, *I will never leave you*, Hebrews 13:5. That’s a promise you can base your life on. If you belong to Him, He will never leave you. Therefore, we are never alone, never forsaken.

Let me offer three very important reasons to let Jesus be your Best Friend: First, Jesus deserves to be your best friend because He already knows you better than anyone else. One definition of a friend is, someone who knows all about us and likes us anyway. Well, no one better fulfills that qualification than Jesus.

Secondly, Jesus deserves to be your best friend because He has done more for you than anyone else. *Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends*, John 15:13. That’s what He did for you, to free you from bondage to your sins.

Third, Jesus deserves to be your best friend because He will always be there when you need Him. *The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged*, Deuteronomy 31:8.

John chapter 11 tells of Jesus’ visit to Bethany where His good friend Lazarus had died. Lazarus’ sister, Martha, greeted Jesus with these accusing words: *If you had been*

here, our brother would not have died, John 11:21. Soon afterward we find recorded the shortest verse in the whole Bible: *Jesus wept, John 11:35. Why did Jesus weep? Because He loved Lazarus as a friend, and also perhaps because, even though He would raise Lazarus from death, He knew that His friend would again face death, as we all do.*

Jesus performed a miracle that day, by raising Lazarus from the tomb where he lay dead four days. His miracle was to remind all of us that death is not the end of the story. He said to the family gathered there, *I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, John 11:25.* His miracle is not that He will be there to keep us from dying. Rather, He will take us through death into life in His eternal presence, which is the place of ultimate communion.

Now, if you go to Larnaca, Cyprus, you will find the tomb of Lazarus, Bishop of Cyprus. Nearly a thousand years ago that tomb was excavated and this simple inscription was found: "Lazarus, Bishop of Larnaca – Four days dead, Friend of Jesus."

The first tomb (Bethany) reminds us of the miracle of life in Jesus. The second tomb (Larnaca) reminds us of the reality of death. And the inscription speaks of the greatest miracle and reality of all: friendship with the Lord of life. That close friendship is the kind of communion that helps you face anything in life and even death itself, knowing that your Friend is with you beyond the grave.

Be A Life Giver

Think over your life and the many friends you've had. Think of the ones who gave you lift, a helping hand, a shoulder to cry on, a prod to move ahead. Think of the friends who shared faith in Christ with you and the ones who nurtured your spiritual growth. Those are life-giving friends. Then think about when you were likewise a friend to someone. How can we be life-giving friends today?

Now think about how Jesus was a friend and still offers to be your friend. Let Him be your friend and you will become a friend like Him.

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you, John 15:15.