

LIFE-GIVING FRIENDS

Several weeks ago (Jan. 10) I spoke of how all creation testifies to the Creator. God gives life to all living things and nature itself continually seeks to glorify the life from God. We all lament death and some fear death. But do we all choose life? I was recently reminded of the precious value of life when I recently got to see and hold our grandson for the first time.

What effort, what travail, are we willing to endure for the new creation we have in Christ? Surely we can say we are not afraid of the darkness, for Jesus is the Light of the world. We can say we don't fear the valley of the shadow of death for Jesus has conquered death and will walk through it with us. Yet, can we say that we do not fear false accusations, mischaracterization, name-calling, "cancel culture," and all the marginalization our social and political culture doles out? I say we can. The key is good relationship with our true Friend. I'm talking about our eternal Friend.

Relationships are essential and unavoidable and ideally, they would all be life giving. Unfortunately, many are often life-draining, or broken, or even toxic. Yet they need not be. Jesus Christ, working through us, causes our relationships to be life-giving because through Him we can become life-givers. Today we're going to consider friends and friendships. For the next several weeks I will be speaking about our most important relationships - friends, church, and family - and how we can be life-givers in those relationships. *For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed*, Romans 8:19. Will it be revealed that you are a child of God? Let's begin with relationship with friends.

The Value of a Friend

For all of us who live on this sometimes lonely earth, wondering how to make life better, how to get along with others, even when circumstances are not so good, the wisdom found in the words of King Solomon still speak to us. 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" for it means dividends paid on a wise investment. Some people spend their lives trying to accumulate possessions - "He who dies with most toys wins." But material things never truly make you happy and fulfilled. The very best investment you will ever make in life will not be a financial one, but the investment you make in relationships.

It's only relationships that bring the most joy (and the most pain when they're not right). So working to make friends and to be a friend is the best investment in life we can make. *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.” Someone 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 ... maybe not as many as you thought. A friend is the kind of person 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. *Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; But how can one be warm alone? Eccl. 4:11.* Sometimes we have a tendency to take a passage so literally that we miss the main point. 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 brings us to full. There are two kinds of people in the world: encouragers and discouragers, which group are you? I confess that at times I’ve been one or the other. Most people who are discouragers don’t know it. They don’t realize that always setting someone straight or pointing out what’s wrong with them or their performance, is the work of a discourager. Better to 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. 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. The greatest gift you can give anyone is an invitation to a relationship with God. Some of you are here today because a friend invited you. They invited you to receive the greatest gift offered to anyone: a personal relationship with

God, forgiveness of your sin, and a place in heaven forever. If you have not accepted Christ personally into your life I want to invite you to do so today.

Okay, those four traits make for solid friends. Maybe you're saying to yourself, "I wish I had a friend like that!" You can! The second half of Proverbs 18:24 says, ... *But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.*

The Truest Friend

For the past 10 months we've found ourselves relying on social media and various forms of digital communication to connect with one another. Many people are finding that it's still no substitute for personal, in-person relationships. Even though we have all sorts of means for communicating, it's not hard to understand why people get lonely. 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. He said those words 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.

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. Because he rose from the dead, he lives today and will be with us forever. 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 did perform a miracle, raising Lazarus from the tomb where he lay dead four days. His miracle was to remind 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 to be there to keep us from dying. It is to take us through death into 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 possibility of a miracle. 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.

Life Giving Friends

Think over your life and the many friends you’ve had. Think of the ones who gave you a lift, a helping hand, a shoulder to cry on, a prod to move ahead. Those are life-giving friends. Think about when you were a friend to someone. How can we be life-giving friends today? Think about how Jesus was a friend and still offers to be your friend. Walk with 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.