

February 2024

“A man that hath friends must show himself friendly and there is a friend that sticks closer than a brother”.

The ideal friend is someone who will lay down their life for you! That is the standard that Jesus promotes. John 15v13. It is not the most common type of friendship though as this extreme level of commitment is very rare.

Most people regard friendship as those you wish to spend time with, and your enemies as those you would find awkward to spend time with. Ultimately, we are to spend eternity together with our brethren and sisters and the Lord Jesus Christ, and if we cannot get along with them then we will struggle. That does not mean that we have to like all our companions, it is not a fellowship based on friendship itself, but that friendship built on shared values and ongoing trust will develop from such a close relationship. We choose our friends, but we do not choose our blood relatives!

Believers should avoid putting extra effort in developing or maintaining friendships external to the truth-holders. This may develop anyway more naturally, and we can and should be friendly to other people in a respectful way, aware that we should treat others as we wish to be treated ourselves, however we must ask ourselves the question, is my friendship with this non-believer affecting my relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. If we are unable to relate the strongest aspects of ourselves, which should and must be our love and service to God through him, to other people then clearly something is wrong and out of place. It is us then who would be out of place because we have put ourselves out of the place where God has placed us. Labour for that which profits!

“Friendship with the world is enmity with God”. James 4v4. These are not the words of Jesus himself. The man who went about

everywhere doing good, giving up of the strength and vitality which he had received meant that he spent and was spent in his outreach to others less worthy than himself. The world was out to get him, whether this was his own internal lusts, which he never satisfied, or the external adversaries or satans which sought to entrap him, he had few friends and many enemies.

James however, under inspiration, focuses upon the polarisation that exists between the Truth holders and the world at large. The world cannot understand Jesus, there are many Jesuses of popular imagination. Few people bother to take time to look for the real Jesus in the scriptures of Truth, far less take time to befriend him. If we are caught up with making friends with those of the world then by definition, we have less time to strengthen our friendship with him. How we spend our time demonstrates our values.

If the world is at enmity with God does that mean that we should have nothing to do with anyone else apart from those of the Truth? If so, that would mean that we could never extend the hand of friendship to call them alongside but would have to remain aloof and remote. That is not how God behaves, He bends over to reach out to His failing children, even all day long to a disobedient and gainsaying people. There are those who take that view and adopt the view that you should not even speak with outsiders and to do so is itself defiling! This spirit is far from the divine example and should be dismissed as a foolish attempt to keep the world out by pulling up the draw bridge of our community. This refuses to recognise that the world resides inside us all, which leads to stagnation and imploding into navel gazing at the smallest of matters.

Friendship is a two-way process. You can be friendly to others but that can but unappreciated and not reciprocated. People ignore or pass over our attempts to establish a relationship, which can be hurtful and may cause us to stop trying. However as with an animal that has been wounded, we might need to put extra effort

into winning its trust, so with people, that extra effort might eventually be noticed by someone who is temporarily blinded by other considerations. Some people are more introverted and less companionable, that does not mean that we cannot be friends with them. The incentive of spending eternity with someone means that time will not run out in the process of getting to know and appreciate each other!

“Iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend” Proverbs 22v17. Friendship is not all about light-hearted indulgence! There is a time and a place for every purpose under heaven. Humour has its place but a continual joviality will grate, God does not crack jokes very often, it is not part of the personality and character He wishes to portray, and believers are exhorted to be more divine by putting on godly characteristics. This verse, from the Proverbs, touches upon the fashioning element of friendship within the confines of the Truth. It can be a touch process and we can inadvertently wound our friend by lack of attention as if we were practising with a sword exchanging blows to sharp ourselves for real conflict. We should never really attack our friends of course, if we cannot turn our cheeks among the brethren and sisters of the One Body, then we are sorry examples of faithful believers!

“Faithful are the wounds of a friend” Proverbs 27v6. Sometimes we can inflict blows upon our friends because they are in danger of running amok and they need to be stopped. This seems to be when we should deliberately wound our friends. Sometimes the truth hurts. Lying to protect others is a dangerous game to play. It may seem like a good strategy to avoid pain, but in this verse, the Holy Spirit makes it plain that pain can accompany friendship. It says of God that it pleased Him to bruise him, Isaiah 53v10. This does not make God a sadist, but rather that God was willing to risk hurt for the greater good. This was necessary for the way that God implemented salvation, it involves our suffering and His

suffering as well. It was the end result of the action taken that pleased God, not the violent and painful means to that end.

Abraham was the friend of God. Isaiah 41v8. He demonstrated this by trying to stay close to God even when he spent decades as a sojourner in a strange land, a true Hebrew! The angels interacted with Abraham more than most, in such a way God extended friendship to him in a way He has not done to others. Many promises were expressly given to this man of great faith. This does not mean that he never lied or let God down in other ways, but a friend will keep working with us and not give up on us despite a period of negativity by us, trusting that it is temporary and that when they have passed through the vale of shadows, that we will return to our right mind once more and appreciate the constant patience shown towards us in their time of difficulty, even as God dealt with this man. Can we say that we are God's friends by what we do?

A Voice from the Altar

Russel Noonan