

MAKING AND KEEPING FRIENDS, Pt 1

How It All Begins

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Eleanor Roosevelt wrote: "Many people will walk in and out of your life, But only true friends will leave footprints in your heart."

"Everyone *hears* what you say. Friends *listen* to what you say. Best friends listen to what you don't say."

"A friend is someone who knows the song in your heart and can sing it back to you when you have forgotten the words."

As with so many significant things in life, friendship really begins with God. He wired us for friendship. Ultimately, for friendship with Himself!

The God-Connection

What does the Old Testament say about the value of friendship?

*Psalm 15:1 Who may worship in your sanctuary, Lord? Who may enter your presence on your holy hill?
2 Those who lead blameless lives and do what is right, speaking the truth from sincere hearts.
3 Those who refuse to gossip or harm their neighbors or speak evil of their friends.
4 Those who despise flagrant sinners,
and honor the faithful followers of the Lord,
and keep their promises even when it hurts.
5 Those who lend money without charging interest, and who cannot be bribed to lie about the innocent. Such people will stand firm forever.*

This passage, which begins with the earnest quest for acceptance in the presence of God, identifies matters of friendship as requisite attitudes and behaviors. Imagine that! How we treat our friends down here is a factor in how we will be welcomed by God in Heaven.

And, what does the New Testament say?

Mark 12:28 One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the debate. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

29 Jesus replied, "The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. 30 And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' 31 The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these."

Of *all* the commandments (and there are many), Jesus identifies the most important, saying, "The second is equally important." Equally important to devotion to the One True God! Loving your neighbor is equally important.

"Friends are God's way of taking care of us."

We were designed from the beginning for friendship. You might wonder, then, why it is sometimes so difficult to achieve.

Lee Iacocca wrote: "My father always used to say that when you die, if you've got five real friends, then you've had a great life."

As a Nigerian proverb suggests, you should "hold a true friend with both your hands."

Growing Purposes

Friendships serve different purposes as we grow older.

The friendship of children helps them to gain a sense of personal identity and grow to adulthood.

Friendship among adults may lead to marriage, but it also teaches us to discern a difference between various kinds of loving relationships and avoid codependent relationships.

Friendship in old age provides support when there is weakness or sickness or mourning for the loss of loved ones.

Quite evidently, friendships (even just a handful) are key to a full life.

Pray for Friends

Therefore, pray for friends; ask God to protect you from evil and to bring real friends into your life. He will. This is actually the easiest part.

Praying for friends is like asking God to grow the church. Then when He does, we begin to pick and choose from those He sends. We rarely reject anyone outright, but by benign neglect they will soon fall away and stop bothering us. Yet, God sets them in the body (family, or circle of acquaintances) as *He* sees fit. He sees a fit; do we?

Pray for Eyes to See

So, you may not recognize the fit of a new (potential) friend in your life. Some, in fact, may first appear as a burden or annoyance. But if you are a praying person, you must also pray for grace to admit those God sends your way, so that you may discover His intention and benefit from His purpose.

To imagine that *any* well-meaning person is incapable of enriching your life is gross arrogance. Bridle that ego of yours and humble yourself under God's mighty hand. If you will, there's a miracle in your future.

The potential friend that God brings your way may hold a position over you or under you at work, may have less material stuff than you do or more, may be older or younger, better educated or not, healthier or weaker. But the value of friendship does not come from those outer trappings of life, it comes from what is inside.

You must ask God to give you spiritual eyes capable of seeing and valuing what is on the inside.

Matthew 9:35 Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages of that area, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness.³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

When *He* saw the crowds, He saw their value and their need. What do you see when you look around you today? There are people in this room that would stand up for you — some who would lay down their lives for you — in a time of need.

"Strangers are just friends waiting to happen."

Do we really see the people around us as God sees them? Do we believe they are part of our lives for a purpose?

Paul's letter to the church in Corinth contains strong teaching on this theme. He was persuaded by the Lord that every member of the body of Christ was significant; *none* was without purpose.

1 Corinthians 12:18 But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it.¹⁹ How strange a body would be if it had only one part! 20 Yes, there are many parts, but only one body.²¹ The eye can never say to the hand, "I don't need you." The head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you."²² In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary.²³ And the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care. So we carefully protect those parts that should not be seen,²⁴ while the more honorable parts do not require this special care. So God has put the body together such that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity.²⁵ This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other.²⁶ If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad.

When we treat friendships as a spiritual purpose for our lives — more than a mere pleasure or convenience — "all the parts are glad."

What do *you* look for in a friend?

Money, cars? Do you ask yourself, "How will I look if I hang out with this person?" (I hope not.)

Some things others have mentioned to me include: interests, character, abilities. Comfort, lack of intimidation. Sense of connection, caring, listening, reliability, availability.

What is the value of a friend?

- Talking, listening, sharing
- Common values and interests
- Reward honesty, won't punish it.
- Push me when I tend to pull back.
- Companion I can call on.
- Some help test ideas and opinions
- Others help with vulnerable subjects

Some of these are surely things you look for in a friend. I wonder what they are looking for *in you*? Do others find these values in you?

Intimate friends are those of whom I do not worry about being judged, being second-guessed, or subsequent gossip. They are safe. To have those, you yourself must be one of those.

Having prayed for God to bring a friend, and to give you eyes to recognize them as a friend, you need next to begin to pray *for* your newfound friend.

Pray for Your Friends

People don't really care how much you know until they know how much you care. So, begin your campaign of caring by praying. Ask God for wisdom in how to pray. At the same time, apply the *Golden Rule of Prayer*: pray for them as you wish they would pray for you.

Friendships don't come easily for everyone or with everyone. Whether we look at friendship as a desirable possibility or a divine obligation, natural difficulties face us. We have emotional hurdles to jump and misconceptions to overcome. I will address some of these over the next few weeks.

I want to close by sharing with you a note I received in an email from a fellow Christian, who offered this wonderful prayer for his friends:

Father, I ask you to bless my friends reading this right now. I am asking You to minister to their spirit at this very moment. Where there is pain, give them Your peace and mercy. Where there is self doubting, release a renewed confidence in Your ability to work through them. Where there is tiredness, or exhaustion, I ask You to give them understanding, patience, and strength as they learn submission to our leading. Where there is spiritual stagnation, I ask You to renew them by revealing Your nearness, and by drawing them into greater intimacy with You. Where there is fear, reveal Your love, and release to them Your courage. Where there is a sin blocking them, reveal it, and break its hold over my friend's life. Bless their finances, give them greater vision, and raise up leaders, and friends to support, and encourage them. Give each of them discernment to recognize the evil forces around them, and reveal to them the power they have in You to defeat it.

I ask You to do these things in Jesus' name.

In love, Your friend