

MAKING AND KEEPING FRIENDS, Pt 3

Sounding Off

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The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people.

I have some shocking news for you this morning: Friends don't always agree.

I know the Bible asks, "How can two walk together if they do not agree?" but there are many times when friends are not walking anywhere — they are just sitting around together talking, or drinking coffee — and they may disagree.

When friends disagree about insignificant things, it usually matters little to either of them and they just move on, but when they disagree about things one or both of them consider significant... then what?

Prickly Subject

Chuck Swindoll suggests that many Christian groups are like a pack of porcupines on a frigid wintry night. The cold drives us closer together in a tight huddle to keep warm. As we begin to snuggle really close, our sharp quills cause us to jab and prick each other—a condition which forces us apart. But before long we start getting cold, so we move back to warm again, only to stab and puncture each other once more.

*To dwell above with saints we love,
That will be grace and glory.
To live below with saints we know;
That's another story.*

"How can we break the old porcupine syndrome?" asks Swindoll. "The answer in one word is involvement. Or, to use the biblical term, it is fellowship."

Friends learn to appreciate their disagreements. In 1920, Dr. J. B. Gambrell, a leader of the Southern Baptist Convention, traveled through Europe with his colleague, Dr. E. Y. Mullins. They made great traveling companions. Dr. Mullins later wrote: "We discussed everything you can think of. We agreed on the great things. We did not always agree on other things. It was a good arrangement, because while we agreed enough to be congenial, we differed enough to make it interesting."

There are some common obstacles to friendships that either hinder their beginning or threaten their demise. I will mention six: fear of closeness, competition, sexuality, gossip, expectations, and blame.

Afraid to Get Close

The inability to make or keep friends often results from being afraid of closeness to others, which can be overcome by practicing closeness with the Lord Jesus through prayer and worship, and then taking small steps toward closeness with other people.

Fear of closeness is the common result of “having been burned” in relationships. What begins as simple, natural tentativeness, when met with hostility or abuse, turns to fear and wariness. It may begin in earliest childhood. Children who have not met before, approach one another tentatively, carefully observing the non-verbal clues that communicate approachability, kindness, or good humor (on the one side) or aloofness, disinterest, or meanness.

Parenting may fan these feelings by communicating trust and openness toward others (on the one side) or fear and self-protection. These are challenging issues for parents! Our world, in many ways, is not safe, and often dangerous. Yet, if we pull into our shell and do not learn (by God’s grace) to face the dangers with confidence and courage, we risk neuroses, at best. Parents, you cannot protect your children from *every* ill of life, so it is best to teach them to prepare for and deal with the common ones, like crossing the street alone, or suffering injury or the loss of property. Protect them, as much as you can, from the life-threatening dangers, and teach them to live through the rest by trusting in God and calling on Him for help and healing.

Friends or Competitors?

Another friendship-disabling factor is remaining stuck in one-sided competitiveness — that is, being driven to compete even when others are not responding competitively. This can be overcome by God’s grace, if you will recognize that you have no real opponent but yourself and that cooperation is more rewarding and less taxing.

Is it reaching out or is it rivalry? Altruism or egoism?

Rivalry is normal, but only as a part of childhood development.

A Sunday school teacher was discussing the Ten Commandments with her five and six year olds. After explaining the commandment to “honor thy father and thy mother,” she asked “Is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters?”

Without missing a beat one little boy answered, “Thou shall not kill.”

Rivalry is a normal part of childhood development, but not adult relationships. If you are fiercely competitive, it is time to “put away childish things.” Don’t misunderstand me, competitiveness is not *bad*, per se, but it must be controlled and limited. This is most important in the home. More marriages and families are bruised and battered by unbridled competitiveness between husband and wife (or parents and children) than by sexual infidelity.

Perceived intelligence and capability are two areas of universal competition.

To all the intelligent husbands in the room: You’ll never be as capable as your wife. But then, you didn’t marry her for her incompetence, did you? So get over it!

To all the skilled husbands in the room: You’ll never be as intelligent as your wife. But then, you didn’t marry her because she was stupid, did you? So get over it!

To all the husbands who think they are both intelligent, skilled, and handsome: Ask your wife for her personal evaluation. Then, get over it!

We all can recognize when competition crosses the line to meanness (at least when it’s coming in *our* direction). Be aware of that line, and be sure you don’t cross it!

Proverbs 27:9 The heartfelt counsel of a friend is as sweet as perfume.

Proverbs 27:6 Wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses.

“Sex” May Be a 4-Letter Word

A third debilitating factor is anxiety about sexuality (many people imagine that any close relationship — some people, any relationship at all — must resolve itself sexually, generating promiscuousness and infidelity and a great deal of unhappiness). Some fear that an inclination to close friendship with a person of the same gender suggests a warped sexual orientation, while others fear that a desire to be a close friend to anyone must inevitably include sexual relations. Closeness does not have to include sex, contrary to what many movies and movie stars’ lives may suggest. Lust will damage or destroy any close relationship.

Telling Tales

Every close friendship brings with it some level of confidentiality; it’s a matter of respect. Breaking a confidence can be costly, especially when it is careless.

Proverbs 16:28 Gossip separates the best of friends.

Proverbs 18:19 An offended friend is harder to win back than a fortified city.

Able to Leap Tall Buildings

If you really want to know who your friends are, just make a mistake.

Are your expectations of your friends too high? Do you look for behavioral perfection? If they really were perfect, would they want to be *your* friends?

Proverbs 17:9 Whoever forgives an offense seeks love, but whoever keeps bringing up the issue separates the closest of friends.

The beauty of forgiveness (as Christ forgives us) is that it really concludes a matter. The brokenness may not yet be repaired, the loss may not yet be replaced, the hurt may not yet be healed, but the matter is done. It is finished. It will not be raised again as a “live issue.” How powerful that is!

Remember that Jesus said, “That which is born of the flesh remains flesh.” Simply put, that means that your flesh — the old, self-interested, rebellious, self-willed part of you resident in your physical body — will always be with you. It does not improve with age! Even after the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in your heart. That is why you are still subject to temptations, and still desire things that God disapproves.

The Holy Spirit’s activity in your life *subdues* your flesh in order to *overcome* temptations, but your flesh remains carnal, a slave to sin. That’s why it is only when we “walk in the Spirit” that we do not “fulfill the lusts of the flesh.”

God is gracious and forgiving of *your* weaknesses. Won’t you be the same of your friends?

James 5:16 Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.

The Blame Game

Misunderstandings are a normal part of relationships. Do you know that? Are you okay with that? Are you prepared for misunderstandings? Can you preserve your friendship as you respond?

If you are not prepared to take misunderstandings in stride, the devil will play with your mind. The Bible calls him the “accuser” of friends, and he will accuse your friends to you. Whatever the issue, he suggests that it is their fault, they should have known better, they are to blame. If you buy that, he will press further: their fault is inexcusable, unforgivable, and unforgettable. In such ways, he “blinds the minds” of those who do not put their trust in God.

This problem dates back to the Tower of Babel. It was not only language that was confused that day, but understanding of one another at a deeper level, resulting in mistrust and suspicion, misjudgment and fear. Friendship may be our deepest need, but it is also our deepest fear. Friends are close enough to hurt us.

Proverbs 27:17 As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend.

That rough edge that you feel from time to time in your friendships is not designed to injure you. God uses those edges to polish and sharpen your spiritual skills. And He uses yours in your friends’ lives.

Remember Jesus’ comment about the speck you’re always trying to remove from your brother’s eye (Matthew 7:3-5 and Luke 6:41-42)? You feel compelled to remove the tiny little speck from your brother’s eye — like a piece of spinach caught between their teeth, you cannot look away, you cannot ignore it — yet you completely ignore the giant logjam in your own eye. Jesus said that in order to really help your brother with his blind spot you must begin by dealing with your own.

When friends seem to become untrustworthy, you need to begin by examining yourself — what is *your* attitude and outlook? — and exercise an overarching trust in God, who is able to make even bad things work together for good, so you won’t become afraid of relating with them and won’t shut down.

It’s Showtime!

Every day is “showtime” for the Lord. You’re on duty, at all times, and everywhere (this isn’t about pastoring, it’s about simply serving — as Christ’s ambassador). We are representing Jesus in our world, so instead of just plowing ahead according to our feelings, we should be asking, “Lord, what do YOU want me to do?”