

MAKING AND KEEPING FRIENDS, Pt 4

No Greater Love

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Jesus offers us the highest example of friendship:

John 15:13 There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Taking a Bullet

But what does that mean? Taking the bullet, like a Secret Service agent? That would be the ultimate expression.

And what, other than a hefty paycheck and pension, is the motive for living like that?

A little girl who was late coming home for supper. Her mother made the expected irate parent's demand to know where she had been.

The little girl replied that she had stopped to help Janie, whose bicycle was broken in a fall.

"But you don't know anything about fixing bicycles," her mother responded.

"I know that," the girl said. "I just stopped to help her cry."

The motive of this level of friendship is COMPASSION.

Taking a bullet for a friend may be the ultimate expression of closeness, but my wife would prefer that I stick around a few more years to help wash dishes and take out garbage and iron shirts and fix things that are broken and raise grandbabies...and be her friend.

Laying It Down

So, let's look at what it might mean to lay down your life — not end it, but lay it down, and not merely lay down your LIFE, but lay down YOUR life.

Again, Jesus is our highest example:

Philippians 2:4 Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. ⁵ You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. ⁶ Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. ⁷ Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names

Christ gave up the comforts, joys, and adoration of heaven to be sullied by the soil of earth and to carry the sins of sinners. He bore the agony of abuse and scorn, the pain of beatings, nails through His wrists, a spear in His side, thorns on His head, and abandonment by His friends to demonstrate the measure of His love. We may find His love, but we also may see His *manner* of loving and are called, like Him, to bear with others' sins, with inflicted pain, with stabbing, cruel remarks and mistreatment — this is our cross to bear.

Becoming Interested

One aspect of this kind of friendship is providing what another person really wants; not what interests you, but what interests *them*.

Friendship involves sacrifices.

Laying down your wishes, preferences, dreams, or interests for their lives and finding out what *their* wishes, preferences, dreams, and interests might be.

If you want to be interesting, be interested. It is what the Bible calls “preferring (or honoring) one another.”

Romans 12:10 *Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other.*

Clearly, this is more than just putting up with each other; this is *delighting* in each other!

Moses described this kind of close friendship in this way: “*Your friend, who is as your own soul...*” (Deuteronomy 13:6).

Cultivation

Friendships like this don’t just happen, they are *cultivated*. It requires attention, self-restraint, and practice over a long period of time.

The apostle Paul was clearly a man committed to raising up a band of special friends. He knew who they were, and he regularly recognized them for their contribution to his spiritual passion. His friends were a resource upon which he obviously depended and without which he would not have survived.

His address book of special friends would have included Aquila and Priscilla, with whom he occasionally worked and lived, Onesiphorus, who often refreshed him, Philemon, who gave him much joy and comfort, Luke, Timothy, and a host of others. Paul’s friends came in all ages and backgrounds, and he seems to have taken great care to cultivate them.

Boundaries

In discussing self-sacrificing friendship, it is a vital point of balance to also mention appropriate *boundaries*. Many people are taken by a romantic misconception: I would do ANYTHING for you!

This idea is played out in a multitude of romantic novels, plays, poems, and even a few real-life situations. Such unshrinking self-sacrifice stirs the heart with romance, but mostly only while the gift of sacrifice is coming *toward* us. When someone demands the same *from* us, a certain reluctance appears.

In fact, one may read many of the narratives of Jesus’ life and wonder why He didn’t do more? Why didn’t He feed more people? Why didn’t He heal *everyone* who was sick? Why didn’t He arrange for a personal consultation with the High Priest, so that He could persuade Him that He was the Messiah, so *all* of Israel would believe and follow Him?

The reason? Because being a true friend will never violate God’s purpose for your life. Jesus said He only did what He saw the Father doing and only said what the Father gave Him to say.

If you are trying to be everything to all people, you are trying to be more than Jesus was!

If your friendship is costing you your sense of who you are and what your life is about, then it is costing you more than God wants you to pay.

It may cost you your comfort and convenience, but it shouldn't cost you your identity.

Something's Pinching

Now, let's talk about uncomfortable friendships.

Once Henry Ford was having lunch with a man when suddenly he asked him, "Who is your best friend?" The man started naming certain people. "No," said Mr. Ford, "I will tell you who your best friend is." He took out a pencil and wrote down this sentence: "Your best friend is he who brings out the best that is within you."

Sometimes, the only way to bring out the best is to make someone you care about uncomfortable.

Proverbs 27:5 Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed.

Rev. William Secker said, He who would be good must either have a faithful friend to instruct him or a watchful enemy to correct him."

Offering correction is sometimes necessary in a valued friendship.

Do it discreetly. Do it considerately. Do it compassionately. Do it faithfully.

Loving the Unlovable

Sometimes great friendship involves loving the unlovable — loving those who finish last, those who are ugly, those who are poor, or who are powerless to help us.

Luke 14:12 Then he turned to his host. "When you put on a luncheon or a banquet," he said, "don't invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbors. For they will invite you back, and that will be your only reward. ¹³ Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you."

Loving the Unkind

Next, true friendship involves loving those who have wronged us. Again, Jesus is our highest example. But He extends the calling to us:

Luke 6:27 "But to you who are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you. ²⁸ Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you. ²⁹ If someone slaps you on one cheek, offer the other cheek also. If someone demands your coat, offer your shirt also. ³⁰ Give to anyone who asks; and when things are taken away from you, don't try to get them back. ³¹ Do to others as you would like them to do to you."

Making Friends for Jesus

Luke describes a wonderful experience of friends caring and helping each other:

Luke 5:17 Now it happened on a certain day, as He was teaching, that there were Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting by, who had come out of every town of Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was present to heal them.¹⁸ Then behold, men brought on a bed a man who was paralyzed, whom they sought to bring in and lay before Him.¹⁹ And when they could not find how they might bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the housetop and let him down with his bed through the tiling into the midst before Jesus.

²⁰ When He saw their faith, He said to him, "Man, your sins are forgiven you."

²¹ And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

²² But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, He answered and said to them, "Why are you reasoning in your hearts?²³ Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise up and walk'?"

²⁴ But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins"—He said to the man who was paralyzed, "I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house."

²⁵ Immediately he rose up before them, took up what he had been lying on, and departed to his own house, glorifying God.²⁶ And they were all amazed, and they glorified God and were filled with fear, saying, "We have seen strange things today!"

The first thing to grab my attention in this story is how much the man's friends cared for him. They refused to be put off by the distance, or the crowd, or the difficulty. They climbed the building and broke up the tile roof and let their friend down where Jesus was.

The second thing that grabs me is Jesus' response to their deed: "He saw *their* faith" and forgave and healed the man. In response to *their* faith! Their faith, expressed in loving deeds toward their friend, moved the heart and hand of God toward their friend.

Finally, I want to say that close friends bring friends to Jesus.

On the surface, this is as simple as inviting friends to church or to a small group. But that's not deep enough. A meeting with Jesus must be the goal, not just a religious event.

Through the life that you live, the way that you speak, the way that you act, and your responses (especially in difficult situations), you represent Jesus to your friends — for better or for worse.

True friends aren't satisfied just to be close friends; they want to be godly friends. Close friends bring their friends to Jesus. They pray for their friends to open their hearts to God's wooing love. They encourage their friends to put their trust in God in the tough places of their lives. They tell about what their own relationship with Jesus has meant to them. They love their friends, even when their behavior grieves them.

What one thing could you do this week to demonstrate how true *your* friendship is? Be a true friend, for Jesus' sake.