

# THE FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN CHRIST & HIS DISCIPLES

## 1). THE IMPORTANCE OF FRIENDSHIP IN CHRIST'S PROGRAM:

To be a friend is both an honor and a sacred trust. The idea that we have the opportunity to be friends with God, is almost beyond imagination, and yet Abraham was called the "Friend of God" (James 2:23). Christ said to His disciples, "You are my friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:14). I believe His words apply equally to all of us. Jesus invites us to be His friends. We do this in part by becoming friends with and serving those with whom we are in contact in this world (Matt. 25:31-40).

A friend is one whom we love and esteem above others. A friend is one whom we can trust, one who will always be there for us. Jonathan and David were such friends (1 Sam. 18:1). Solomon in his book of Proverbs gives the qualities of a true friend. (1) "A friend loves at all times", (Prov. 17:17), whether it be in time of prosperity, or of adversity. (2) "There is a friend that sticks closer than a brother", (Prov. 18:24); he will be there for us when our own kin may have forsaken us. (3) He will be there to reprove or correct us when we do something wrong, (Prov. 27:6). "Faithful are the wounds of a friend"; as we know that his criticism of us comes from a loving motive. (4) "Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart: so doth the sweetness of a man's friend by hearty counsel", (Prov. 27:9). We can trust that a friend's counsel is sincerely given in our best interest and not for personal gain. (5) A friend will dispel our loneliness and stimulate our thinking, "Iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend" (Prov. 27:17). (Crudens Unabridged Concordance, p. 180).

Early in WWII, due to the fact that the draft had created a man shortage, I was given a job with the Associates Insectery in Santa Paula, CA. We sprayed a substance on citrus trees composed of various chemicals which killed pests that were destructive to the trees. These chemicals were combined with water, oil and cow's blood. The blood served as an emulsifier, causing the oil and water to mix. When this mixture was sprayed on the trees, the oil remained on the leaves of the trees insuring a deposit of the beneficial chemicals which killed the pests.

The blood of Jesus has done that for us in respect to our becoming friends with those about us in the world. The blood of Jesus has put us on an equal footing (we are all doomed without the saving power of His blood – Heb. 10:19-20), and it has destroyed the artificial social

barriers to friendship. We used to have a motto as we were doing church work in Italy, "first a friend and then a brother or sister. The pool for creating new friendships is bigger and more readily accessible than ever before. "In 1900, about 8% of the world's population lived in sizeable cities. A century later, over 50% (more than 3 billion people) live in cities. What this means from a ministry perspective is that more than 2 billion of the world's non-churched people are no longer geographically distant from the church; they are still culturally distant, but they live in the largest cities of the world." (Explorer, Aug. 14, 2000).

Unfortunately, the climate of our contemporary world is not good for making friends. It seems that the more people are congregated in large numbers, the more they become protective of their space, and often purposefully avoid making any new friends. Our homes become places of retreat which make it possible for us to close out the world. This spirit makes it hard for Christians to be light, salt, and leaven in the world, and is a negative for church growth.

In a recent time period, 30 million Americans who had been members of a church for only a short while, dropped out. A large denomination in the U.S. did follow up to find why church members were leaving. Seventy-five percent said it was because they did not feel wanted. In further study, recent converts who had remained active were compared to other recent converts who left. Both groups were asked to identify seven new friends that they had made since their conversion. Those who stayed averaged naming seven new friends, while those who left averaged naming only two friends. This research showed that 80% of dropouts leave within 12 months of having become members. Some of the questions that new members ask are: "Can I make friends in this church?" "Will I fit in?" "Does this church need me?" (Ministry Advantage, May/June 1994, pp. 5-7). Research indicates that most of us have contact with between 500 and 2500 acquaintances each year. Of this number, between 20 and 100 come to be considered "core friends." Of this number, only from 1 to 7 will grow to be closely and intimately involved with our life. (Today's Christian Woman, May/June 1993, pp. 52-55). If we are not willing to improve on this record, we will allow many opportunities to be salt, light, and leaven to escape us.

We have all heard of friendship evangelism. This has been defined as the process of establishing a beachhead of love among the unchurched. One specialist in this area has said "Christians must penetrate the world around them, relating, caring, helping, listening; we must build meaningful relationships with our unchurched neighbors." In an article entitled "Beyond the Holy Huddle," the author tells of coming to realize

that in his work and in his friendships he had surrounded himself with people of faith. He took a part time job and began reaching out to new people. He made it a point of becoming acquainted with his neighbors and doing what he could for them. He soon found that by making new friends, he was able to reach out to others for Christ. His conclusion, "Christians can be salt and light in their worlds by seizing opportunities to meet human needs, build bridges to people and live the Christ-life before others." (Discipleship Journal, Mar/Apr 1994, pp. 18- 22).

Jesus was a very social person and went about continually enlarging his circle of friends. So much so that we read in Luke 7:34, "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking; and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man, and a wine drinker, a friend of publicans and sinners'." Making new friends was a matter of high priority with Jesus. He repeatedly referred to people about him as friends. He made it a point to tell his disciples that he no longer called them bondservants but friends (John 15:15).

His friendships crossed racial, social, economic and gender lines, as in the case of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7-42), touching and befriending lepers (Matt. 8:2-3, Luke 17:11-18), befriending a Roman centurion by healing his servant (Matt. 8:5-13), and associating with many women, some of which even contributed to his financial support (Luke 8:1-3). Jesus preferred to travel with fairly substantial numbers of people. While in their company, He gave them a great deal of attention, and was very attentive to their needs. He also found ways to involve them in his mission, so that it developed as an interdependent approach to evangel-ism. He did not value independence as much as he valued the forming of mutually dependent teams.

As all of us have experienced, efforts to create close affective bonds with friends do not always work out. Jesus watched in sorrow as many of his disciples turned away and left him because they said his teaching was too hard (John 6:53-66), and we cannot imagine the sorrow He felt when He was betrayed by Judas. The end result of Jesus' efforts to be a friend is seen in the transformed lives of His friends. Their trembling knees were given strength, their faltering courage was bolstered up, and many of them eventually went to a violent death rather than to betray the trust of their special friend who had committed to them the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

## **2). JESUS' FRIENDS PRESENTED HIM DIFFICULT TEMPTATIONS:**

It is clear that mixed with the disciples' admiration for the wisdom, teachings, and goodness of Christ, there was an element of upward mobility in their attachment to Him. Having as they did a material

concept of the coming Kingdom, the disciples often fussed amongst themselves as to which of them would have the highest positions in Christ's kingdom (Mark 9:33-34, Matt. 20:20-28).

Their own aspirations coupled with their misunderstanding of the nature of the kingdom caused them to be in an adversarial position relative to Christ when He began talking about His suffering and death. In one instance, as He was so speaking, Peter rebuked Jesus, saying that "This shall never happen to you!" This was so troubling to Jesus that he actually called Peter "Satan" and said "You are a stumbling block to me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." (Matt.16:21-23).

This was not different from the attitudes found within Jesus' own family. Earlier in His ministry, as word of His teachings filtered back to Nazareth, His own family said, "He has lost His senses" and they set out to take Him home by force. When they arrived at the house filled with people where he was teaching, they sent word in to Him that He should come out to them. Jesus refused, saying that His real mother, brothers and sisters were those who do "the will of God." (Mark 3:20-35).

It is sometimes the case with friends, that what they promise and what they actually do turns out to be different. While the disciples all said that they were ready to go "to prison and to death" for Him (Matt. 26:33-35, Luke 22:33), they soon forgot, and at His arrest, "All the disciples left him and fled." (Matt. 26:56). Peter, who had promised that even if all the others forsook Jesus, he would not, is the one who was so intimidated by the priestly rulers that to protect himself, he cursed and swore declaring not only that he was not a follower of Christ, but that he did not even know Him (Matt. 26:69-75).

At Jesus' crucifixion, we are told that "all of His acquaintances and the women who accompanied Him from Galilee" were there (Luke 23:49). But, of the disciples, only "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John), and to whom Christ committed His mother, appears to have been present at the cross (John 19:25-27). In addition, we find the preparation for burial and the burial of Jesus' body was provided for, not by the postles, but by Nicodemus, and a secret believer in Christ by the name of Joseph of Arimathea (John 19:38-42).

What is even more incriminating was the refusal of the disciples to believe the testimony of the women about the resurrection of Christ (Luke 24:1-11). Some in disillusionment were already on their way out of Jerusalem heading home, evidently with no further hope that this Jesus was indeed the "redeemer of Israel" (Luke 24:13-35). Only after the personal appearance of Jesus was all doubt removed. To their

credit, let it be said, that by the work of the Holy Spirit within them, they proceeded to change the world!

### **3). JESUS' CLOSEST FRIENDS---PETER AND THE DISCIPLES**

Of the hundreds of thousands of Jews that were immediately available to Him, these were the ones that He chose, for He said to them, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain..." (John 15:16). In this same sequence of passages, He also said, "I no longer call you bond-servants...but I have called you friends" (John 15:15).

It should be noted that while the Apostles were probably Christ's closest friends, within that circle, there were three persons who were especially close to Him, and often were with him when the others were not; they were Peter, James and John (Mark 9:2, 13:3, 14:33). Of these, John appears to stand out as being especially close to our Lord (John 13:33, 20:7, 20). I will conclude this study on Christ as a friend to Peter and His disciples by indicating the various ways in which His friendship was expressed to them. As I do this, may all of our hearts be warmed as we realize that these same manifestations of friendship are there for us if we are willing to accept them, and also that these facets of friendship should be shown by us to others.

His friendship involved His willingness and ability to look beyond the surface, beyond the apparent, beyond what is to what could be. I am sure that if Jesus had had a PR person, he would have immediately quit when he saw the kind of men Jesus was choosing to help Him establish His world empire. These included fishermen that were into fighting and bad language. a tax collector whom the public considered at least a traitor, and most probably a thief. There was also a zealot whose idea about the Kingdom was one of violence and destruction. It would have seemed hopeless to anyone else that these men of little education, without power or standing in their society, and with no preparation for religious leadership could have ever achieved Jesus' dreams for the Kingdom. The truth is that Jesus saw the vast deposit of potential that lay buried deep within them, and accepted the challenge of bringing that potential to life. Friendship truly makes it possible for one to see and help bring into being what others do not see. His friendship was laden with faith in them that they would rise to the challenge, and that they would be able to do what He asked them to do. How often in life is it true that people (including children), will do what we expect them to do. How many foul deeds are done because the perpetrators know that such deeds fit their reputation, and fit what the public expects of them. On the other hand how many of such temptations to

evil are resisted and instead noble deeds done because of someone's trust, because of someone's faith.

His friendship made it possible for Him to be patient and even forgive momentary lapses and failures on their part as they were learning how to do better, as they grew in their understanding of Him, of His Kingdom, and of their role. So, He put up with their wrong ideas about the Kingdom, with their competing amongst themselves for power and position in the coming world order, and even with those times in which they became part of the opposition, trying to convince Him to settle for a different way and a different kingdom.

His friendship made Him their servant. He took care of them, He provided for their needs, He defended them, and He even washed their feet. But beyond all of this, He promised to serve in their (and our) behalf in the courts of heaven. He would prepare a place for them (and us) in the Father's house in order that they (and we) could be together eternally. At the appropriate time, He would come again to take His friends to that home. (John 14:1-3). In the meantime, He promised that He would be with them (and with us) until the end of the present earthly age (Matt. 28:20). Therefore, even as we speak, He is busy making intercession for us in the presence of the Father, ever working to make sure that all of His friends will arrive safely home (Hebrews 7:25).

His friendship gave him the courage to correct Peter and the disciples when that was necessary. He could even call Peter Satan, as we have seen above, when Satan was using Peter to tempt Christ (Matt. 16:23). He rebuked His disciples for interfering with the mothers who brought their little children to Jesus for blessing (Luke 18:25-17). He rebuked James and John when they wanted to call fire from heaven to devour persons who rejected Jesus (Luke 9:53-56).

His friendship was accompanied by a fierce spirit of protectiveness. On one occasion He said, "My sheep hear my voice and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one." (John 10:27-30). In His high priestly prayer to the Father before His death, He said, "While I was with them, I was keeping them in Thy name which Thou has given Me; and I guarded them, and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled." (John 17:11).

At His arrest, rather than thinking about his own plight, He asked that His disciples not be arrested (John 18:18).

Finally, the ultimate intensity of His love for His friends is indicated in John 15:13, where He declared, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." And that is exactly what Christ has done! What a friend we have in Jesus!!!

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