

Friendship: by Graham Mol

The song [*You've got a Friend in Me*](#) by Randy Newman captures so simply and beautifully what it means to have a friend. A friend who will walk the difficult road with you, one who shares in your troubles and can relate because they have troubles of their own. A friend who sticks with you and sees things through.

As the song states, some other folks may be smarter, bigger or stronger but it will be love for one another that will define the relationship, love that will keep that friendship alive through the years. What a blessing it is to have a friend like that! Maybe the words of this song make you think of a particular friend or a few friends in your life. Take a moment to thank the Lord for that friend or group of friends.

The love of a friend is one of the most powerful things in our lives. Jesus even had this to say:

“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13)

What gives weight to Jesus’ words here is the fact that He did indeed demonstrate that great love by laying down His life, dying for our sins on the cross, and He did so as a friend. Jesus modelled for us the power and the purpose of friendship. This has become an increasingly important topic for us in the world today.

What got me first thinking about this issue was a conversation I heard on the radio where the presenter and his guest, a sociologist/psychologist, were talking about the how the nature of modern friendship has changed. In the past one’s friends would often be around, present, involved. As kid’s you’d have these aunties and uncles (who weren’t related) but who’d always be around – like an extended family. Nowadays with the rise of cell phones and social media we have a greater ability to connect with people and keep in touch but without actually being in touching distance. Covid and the lock-downs exacerbated this. We got more used to connecting virtually and less used to being present together.

Surveys and studies have shown the younger generation the more people reporting loneliness and lack of close friends. Those are the real, involved, present, walk-alongside friends for the “Facebook” friends are a plenty. For many the pace of life, but maybe even more so the self-absorption of one’s own needs and interests, has resulted in people having fewer meaningful and deep friendships. On the other end as people get older, retire and are less active socially, they also find themselves feeling lonelier – lacking those connection points.

This is something we should take seriously – especially as Christians. The late pastor and theologian Tim Keller speaks of the discipline of friendship. Yes, a spiritual discipline that we are to have in our lives as believers. Keller identifies two major factors that are important in true, life-giving friendship:

Constancy and Intimacy

Constancy

Proverbs 18:24 gives a good definition of what constancy means:

One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

This is a friend who sticks with you in the tough times, who comes alongside to share burden. This is that friend who is there to comfort and listen even when it costs them. They could be enjoying themselves, doing other stuff but here they are, sacrificially.

Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:2)

A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity. A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity. (Proverbs 17:17)

Intimacy

We are called to be a friend to all believers and show love for one another. But in your life you will have those who are closer, the inner circle. Jesus called the Twelve to walk close with Him. Within that group He had three who He was closer to: Peter, James and John. Of that three, John was His best and closest friend. John's Gospel refers to himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved. We know that Jesus loved them all, this phrase marked a closer friendship.

True, life-giving, close friendship requires opening up, it requires vulnerability. Pastor Craig Groeschel, in talking about friendship says the following: "We impress people with our strengths but we connect with people through our weaknesses."

When we open up, make ourselves vulnerable to a trusted friend, we allow them to know us more fully and they can help us grow. It can be a scary thing to open up that much to someone therefore we need to be wise in our choice. They need to be someone who is trustworthy, has our best interests at heart, who is humble.

There is a wonderful example of friendship given to us in the Old Testament, that of David and Jonathan. David we know well, the shepherd boy who was chosen by God to be king over Israel, anointed by Samuel the prophet. David who took on the giant Goliath with nothing but a sling and some rocks yet was triumphant for the Lord was His strength and deliverer. Jonathan was the eldest son of Saul the current king of Israel. Effectively he was the prince. Although from different backgrounds David and Jonathan become firm friends:

1 Samuel 18:1-4

After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return home to his family. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt.

A strong bond forms between David and Jonathan, they find a kindred spirit in each other. The words of C.S. Lewis on that of friendship are applicable here:

"In friendship...we think we have chosen our peers. In reality a few years' difference in the dates of our births, a few more miles between certain houses, the choice of one university instead of another...the accident of a topic being raised or not raised at a first meeting--any of these chances might have kept us apart. But, for a Christian, there are, strictly speaking no chances. A secret master of ceremonies has been at work. Christ, who said to the disciples, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you," can truly say to every group of Christian friends, "Ye have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one another." The friendship is not a reward for our discriminating and good taste in finding one another out. It is the instrument by which God reveals to each of us the beauties of others."

God has blessed David and Jonathan by bringing them together as friends. Twice we are told that Jonathan loved David as himself. We think of Jesus' commandment for us to love our neighbour as our ourselves. This is the kind of love for one another that we are called to. David and Jonathan form a covenant – a commitment as friends.

Jonathan does something significant. In handing David his robe and his weapons it was a symbolic act of recognising David's right to be king. Instead of jealousy (like we see in Saul) Jonathan has David's best interests at heart.

King Saul would become more jealous of David until he decides to kill him off. Jonathan stands up for his friend, warning him of his father's intentions, and attempting to persuade Saul from harming David – which he succeeds in for a time. Later when Saul is set on getting rid of David, Jonathan risks the ire of his own father to ensure that David gets away safely, even putting his own life at risk. Finally, the moment comes where David has to flee – it is a moment of sorrow for the two friends.

1 Samuel 20:42

Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the LORD, saying, 'The LORD is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever.'" Then David left, and Jonathan went back to the town.

The friends would see each other one last time while David was on the run from Saul as he hunted him down.

1 Samuel 23:16-18

And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God. "Don't be afraid," he said. "My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this." The two of them made a covenant before the LORD. Then Jonathan went home, but David remained at Horesh.

A friend who helps you draw near to God, to find strength in the Lord. That friend is a gift from God in your life. This is why we need friends, close friends who will stick with us who will love us as themselves. This is why we need to be that friend: an encourager, willing to shoulder their burdens, to come alongside another.

The story of David and Jonathan also makes us aware of the fact that the circumstances of life can mean that some of our friendships, even the closest of them, can sometimes only be for a season in our lives. Many of you know the sorrow of losing a friendship for whatever reason, but we can draw comfort, joy and strength from the very fact that that friendship brought us life and strength and blessing.

Pray for good strong friendships. Pray for God to help you be a good friend. Pray and seek.

In closing I want to point our focus back on Jesus, our truest and everlasting friend. How incredible it is that the Everlasting One, the King of kings and Lord of Lords offers us His friendship.

John 15:12-17

"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other."