

Godly Friendship: A Priceless Commodity

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As the greater church of God has continued to fragment, splintering asunder congregations and creating yawning chasms between former friends and acquaintances, my wife Julie and I have come to the conclusion that a close friend who has God's Holy Spirit is one of the most valuable commodities one could ever desire. As more of our former friends and acquaintances drift away from the teachings that we once collectively valued—or seemed to—the ones that stay loyal become precious as rare gemstones.

God Almighty has set in motion the laws that bond one person to another and groups of people to each other. He invented friendship and has set into motion laws that sustain it.

The God of the Old Testament, who later became Christ, actually formed several friendships with human beings. The Bible refers to David as a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22; I Samuel 13:14). Abraham is called the "friend of God" several times:

» And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the *friend of God*. (James 2:23)

» But you, Israel, are My servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the descendants of Abraham, *My friend*. (Isaiah 41:8)

» Are You not our God, who drove out the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel, and gave it to the descendants of Abraham *Your friend* forever? (II Chronicles 20:7)

We can never overestimate the value of a true friend. Solomon considers friendship as something to be valued, protected, and nurtured: "Do not forsake your own friend or your father's friend, nor go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity; for better is a neighbor nearby than a brother far away" (Proverbs 27:10).

Ties That Bind

We find Solomon's classic exposition on the value of friendship in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up. Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; but how can one be warm alone? Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

The last portion of the passage refers to a threefold cord. If one individual and another individual make a twofold cord, the threefold cord must have an additional element that we can infer to be God Almighty. If God is not placed first in every liaison that we human beings make (marriage, friendship, or church fellowship) the relationship will be short lived.

Consider these scriptural warnings:

- » Though they *join forces*, the wicked will not go unpunished; but the posterity of the righteous will be delivered. (Proverbs 11:21)
- » Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord; though they *join forces*, none will go unpunished. (Proverbs 16:5)

Any alliance or friendship not based upon God's laws and principles will not succeed. We are warned to stay away from any such bond:

If your brother, the son of your mother, your son or your daughter, the wife of your bosom, or your friend who is as your own soul, secretly entices you, saying, "Let us go and serve other gods," which you have not known, neither you nor your fathers, . . . you shall not consent to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him or conceal him. . . . (Deuteronomy 13:6, 8)

Close or intimate friends should have an intense love for God's law. Any alliance made between two people that explicitly or implicitly subverts God's laws is destined to be destroyed.

God set in motion those immutable laws that bind one person to another. There are laws of attraction that bring human beings with similar traits together. Cliques also adhere or cohere on this principle.

Some studies in human behavior suggest that people bond with one another because they see aspects of their own personalities in others (sometimes good, such as a common love for music or literature, and sometimes bad, such as a proclivity to be a clutter-bug or indecisive). The recognition of a parallel trait in someone else causes us to feel protective toward that person.

For instance, some social analysts have speculated that the reason the United States Senate did not carry out the House of Representatives recommendations to expel President Bill Clinton from office was a timidity rising from their own parallel sins and iniquities. As the wife of a prominent radio commentator has suggested, "Bill Clinton makes us comfortable with our own sins."

Even the phenomenon of "love at first sight" has frequently been explained as projecting onto the other person certain personality traits found in the person doing the projecting. Carl Gustav Jung has written that each man carries around in his psyche an idealized image of his own "Eve." Conversely, each woman carries in her own psyche an idealized image of her own "Adam." According to Jung, these images are influenced by the parent figures in their lives.

Sometimes the things that draw people into alliances may seem questionable or dubious. Several years ago, a student of mine spoke to me about a new relationship within which she found herself. She admitted that she had begun dating this other individual because they shared the same *dislikes*:

- » They both hated the Dean of Students.
- » They both hated going to Forum or Assembly.
- » They both hated the food in the cafeteria.

- » They both had the same aversion to the same faculty member.

The whole premise of their relationship stemmed from negatives—often the basis for the bonding of maverick political parties. For some reason, I did not think that these parallel "things in common" provided much of a basis for a long-term relationship.

Better Bonding

We are admonished to bond with people who will encourage our better behaviors and characteristics. We eventually take on the characteristics of the people with whom we bond. We find numerous biblical cautions on this principle or law of bonding:

- » Can two walk together, unless they are agreed? (Amos 3:3)
- » He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed. (Proverbs 13:20)
- » Make no friendship with an angry man, and with a furious man do not go, lest you learn his ways and set a snare for your soul. (Proverbs 22:24-25)

The world's psychology claims that friendship is enhanced by communication. Godly psychology stresses communication but with a slightly different emphasis. Encounter groups (products of well-meaning but misguided psychological principle) encourage, "Let it all hang out—give vent to your pent up feelings." One psychologist suggests that, if one genuinely feels like saying, "I hate you! I hate you!" he should just say it, if it is an honest feeling. However, consider God's instruction: "A fool vents all his feelings, but a wise man holds them back" (Proverbs 29:11).

God's psychology insists that friends build up instead of tear down. The Scripture gives ample instructions for godly communication between friends: "Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful" (Proverbs 27:5-6).

A friend ought to be able both to offer and receive encouragement and loving criticism. As we in our local memberships now number in the teens rather than the hundreds, our faults become more transparent to one another. We need to come to appreciate both the encouragement and the candid criticism from our friends, as well as their kindness and generosity.

A friend should never commiserate with or encourage his friend's bitter attitude or rebellion against any of God's laws, statutes, or principles but should encourage him to change course:

- » Ointment and perfume delight the heart, and the sweetness of a man's friend does so by hearty counsel. [A true friend both gives and accepts good counsel.] (Proverbs 27:9)
- » As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend. (Proverbs 27:17)

Godly communication between friends involves sharing common interests, giving and accepting advice, giving and accepting criticism, and giving and accepting encouragement. A healthy relationship requires both giving and receiving, with the primary emphasis on the way of give.

Sharing Confidences

As an extension of godly communication, the ability to confide freely in another with no fear of betrayal is a mark of a mature friendship. In Clayton Steep's 1982 *Good News* article, "Why Was Abraham Called the Friend of God?" he writes, "You can discuss what is on your own mind, sharing your joys, your observations, your plans and, yes, your regrets and sorrows. In the most intense friendships nothing needs to be held back."

The article goes on to say, "Best friends are not only persons in whom you can confide, they can confide in you. Trustful confidence is a two-way street." However, a cynical Yiddish proverb gives the caution, "Your friend has a friend—so tell him no secrets."

In I Samuel 18, Jonathan and David share many secrets and confidences. Neither worried about betrayal because each loved the other "as his own soul." If friends and family members would emulate David and Jonathan, loving others as themselves, there would not be betrayal of confidence.

Unfortunately, blackmail is often the incentive to silence in some "friendships." "Friends" say, "I won't tell what I know about you if you don't tell what you know about me"—much like the missiles aimed at Washington, Beijing, and Moscow at the height of the Cold War guaranteed the "friendship" between America and its Cold War enemies. Confidences held together with the glue of blackmail are destined to fail.

There is perhaps no more disheartening experience, in or out of the church, then to have a confidence betrayed. It hurts and it burns like napalm spread on the most sensitive parts of the anatomy. It guarantees a destroyed friendship. God says, "A brother offended is harder to win than a strong city, and contentions are like the bars of a castle" (Proverbs 18:19).

In "The Cowboy Code," authored by Gene Autry, rule #2 states, "The cowboy must never go back on his word or a trust confided in him." God Almighty is the recipient of more confidential pieces of information than anyone else is, yet He is not bursting at the seams to tell anyone. After He forgives a transgression (told to Him in deepest confidence), He forgives and absolutely forgets (Jeremiah 31:34). It is up to us as the regenerated offspring and emulators of God, if we cannot forget the sensitive confidences our friend has entrusted with us, at least not to spread them around.

Perhaps the most desired quality in a marriage or friendship is loyalty. Regardless of the circumstances, a Christian friend is both a fair-weather and a foul-weather friend—the kind who sticks closer than the brother born for adversity (Proverbs 17:17). Jesus Christ and God the Father have already made such a commitment to us: "Let your conduct be without covetousness, and be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you'" (Hebrews 13:5).

Glued Together

If a friendship or a relationship is based on the way of get, it will crumble as stormy weather sets in. This often occurs in cases in which a person stupidly marries another for money rather than mature love. Liaisons based upon the mortar of mammon have very short duration. Consider:

Many entreat the favor of the nobility, and every man is a friend to one who gives gifts. All the brothers of the poor hate him; how much more do his friends go far from him! He may pursue them with words, yet they abandon him. (Proverbs 19:6-7)

In the words of the old Yiddish proverb, "There are three types of friends: those like food, without which you can't live; those like medicine, which you need occasionally; and those like an illness, which you never want." We certainly want to eliminate the last type, but we need to build and strengthen godly friendships. God's work is a love-building work, forging bonds between fathers and children and children and fathers (Malachi 4:6), in essence, the entire family of God. Godly friendship is the cement that makes this all happen.

Here is a recap of the essential characteristics of a Christian friendship:

1. It places God first, the middle strand in a threefold cord (Ecclesiastes 4:12).
2. It follows the principles or laws of bonding (interest in the same things), which include at the forefront a love for godly principles.
3. It involves a give-and-take communication involving advice, criticism, and encouragement.
4. It involves a climate in which the most sensitive of confidences can be exchanged without fear of betrayal.
5. It consists of an unbreakable bond that lasts through good and bad times.

A minister once taught, "A friend is someone, who, if you make a colossal botch of something, doesn't think you've made a permanent job of it." God is such a friend. Let us try to emulate Him.