

You Are My Friends!

Love Within Friendship

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A news headline read, "Woman tried to burn down house of long time friend who defriended her on Facebook." Thankfully, although the ex-friend and her husband were sleeping, they were able to wake up in time to get out of the house, but their garage disappeared. Within a few hours, an online advertisement for a T-shirt had the in-your-face threat, "Don't make me unfriend you!"

Unfriending or defriending a person on Facebook can be quite costly. The evidence shows that most Facebook users have done it and most have had it done to them. It must be a very common thing. Whether on Facebook or in real life, unfriending seems to stick in our minds. If we are the unfriended, we never forget it. Unlike hiding or unfollowing friends on Facebook, where you exclude their posts from your news feed and they never know, unfriending cuts the connection completely. Its effects are forever.

When you unfriend people you are telling them that there is no place in your Facebook world for them and that they are so offensive or obnoxious or boring that hiding is not enough. So, in your disdain, you have got to cut the cord, slam the door, exclude them from your life. Defriending is personal! Defriending hurts!

When you reject a person (and defriending is rejecting) you hope that you never see them again. There is a cost to defriending, so you must decide whether it is worth it or not. Hiding a Facebook friend may be a better choice. This is not a sermon against Facebook or anything like that. It is an introduction to the rest of the sermon.

Please turn with me to John 15, verse 8. This will be a pivotal be a pivotal chapter for us today. In contrast to the cynical way of the Facebook world,

we find Jesus Christ's encouragement and desire to have many true friends who He never defriends, much more lasting. Christ says, "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you."

John 15:8-11 "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. [that is, friends] As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full."

How does love within a friendship work and why is bearing much fruit essential in a friendship?

The emphasis here in this passage is on the glorification of God is linked to four elements, each of which should be very obvious in our Christian lives. The elements are fruitfulness, love, obedience, and joy. Each one is linked to the central theme of John 15, which is the need for Christians consciously to remain in Christ.

The first of these ideas, as I mentioned, is fruitfulness, which Jesus highlights by saying in John 15:8, "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples." Now, the flow of thought is that if we are Christ's and remain in Him, then we will be fruitful in the Christian life, in the way we live our life, and God will be glorified in our fruitfulness. Also, the fact that we are fruitful will be a proof that we are certainly Christ's disciples, that we are Christ's friends.

Now, at this point, we should define the real meaning of fruitfulness which has various meanings in the Bible. Because if we do not or if we use the wrong biblical definition, we could easily discourage some members of the church, which we certainly do not want to do.

Let me explain what I mean. If we begin with a phrase like Paul's words of expectation in writing to the Romans,

Romans 1:13 I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often plan to come to you (but was hindered until now) [here is the phrase I want], that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles.

If we therefore identify the fruit of the Christian life only with converts to Christ, which Paul is talking about here, then we may discourage any who for whatever reason do not see many called by God into the church. And we may discourage those who because of sickness or old age or whatever unfavorable circumstances, are unable to do very much within the church and who are therefore made to feel they are useless.

It is true, of course, that the increase in membership may be looked at as fruit in a certain sense, which the Bible does sometimes do. But the real spiritual fruit is listed in,

Galatians 5:22-23 [you are very familiar with this] But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.

The fruit is the fruit of Christ's own character within us. It is His love, joy, peace, and so on within us. Once we see this, we see that a fruitful life can belong to any member of God's church, regardless of his age or his circumstances, his capabilities, in that way physically. So we should not be disheartened by old age or by suffering. In fact, the person in this condition may even be encouraged by spiritual fruit, because it is in such circumstances that the character of Christ can be clearly seen in those who are in such a limited situation.

Now, there is the need for fruit in the sense of conversions to the truth. We obviously need these too. But the starting point is this spiritual fruit in our character, which is essential to our witness of God's way of life and our friendship with Christ.

The second of Christ's emphasis is love, and this follows naturally since love is a fruit of the Spirit. In fact, it is the main fruit. In I Corinthians 13:13, as you well know, Paul says, "The greatest of these is love."

John 15:9 [Jesus speaks of it, saying] "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love."

Let us look at the three parts of this verse.

The first part is a declaration of love. "I have loved you." And we know that these are wonderful words to hear at any time, if they are true. We love to hear, "I love you" or "I have loved you from the moment I set eyes upon you" or "I will always love you." Now, this is the basis of any good marriage and when the love expressed is the fullest measure of love, it is all the better. Of course, it is the basis of a Christian home in the love between parents and children. And in a different sense, love is the basis of friendship and certainly a fellowship within the church.

Now, the church is built on the foundation of the love of God and so love between members of the church produces a powerhouse of friendship. As the church extends the hand of friendship to you, you are encouraged to extend yours to others. But if this is true when the words are spoken by mere men and women, how much more wonderful are they when they are spoken by Jesus Christ, as they are here, and when we are the ones loved.

This is an astonishing love because there is nothing in us that could give cause for it. We still sin occasionally. Christ is holy. We have rebelled against God, nevertheless, Christ loves us!

Turn with me, if you will please, to Deuteronomy 7, verse 6. Notice the steps of the expression of His love. To begin with, He loved us with an electing love. And this is the stage of love revealed here in in relation to Israel. And as you well know, we as the church, are spiritual Israel.

Deuteronomy 7:6-8 "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The

Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were at the least of all peoples; but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

We know as members of God's church that God has redeemed us from sin, which Egypt represents. The Eternal loved you because He loved you—period. His love for us was so great.

Now, in a sense, Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son left His Father's home in heaven to come to earth, to prepare His bride, the church, and He redeemed her. The incarnation is Jesus Christ becoming like us so that we might become like Him. And that includes friendship, which is a very important part of our relationship. Finally, having elected us in love and become like us in a human form, Christ died for us.

John 15:13 [Jesus said] "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay one's life for his friends."

And that is true; and the greatest example of it is the death of Jesus Himself.

Christ laid down His life voluntarily, which was especially a proof of love. Other people, if they died for us, would only pay the debt of nature a little before its time. But Jesus did not need to die as far as He Himself was concerned. Also, He died amid painful, shameful circumstances. Not to mention the desertion He felt, which made His death exceptionally bitter.

Death by crucifixion on the cross is absolute proof and assurance of the height of our Savior's infinite love for us. He died the death of a felon, between two thieves, utterly friendless, the object of vicious ridicule; and this He had to do while bearing our sins in His body. You are very familiar with all of this, but we have to be reminded on a regular basis.

It is not only a sublime declaration of love that we have in John 15:9, we also have the measure of that love because Jesus says, "As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you." What greater love can there be than that! What a

contrast that is with the friendlessness He faced at the time of the mock trials against Him. There is no friendship where there is cruelty, disloyalty, or injustice. And when the wicked get together, it is a plot. They are not friends, they are accomplices.

Jesus says that He has loved us, not with an imperfect or even a "perfect" human love, but rather with the *greatest* love. That is namely, the love which has existed within Their divine nature from all eternity and which will exist to all eternity, the love of the Father for Him and His love for the Father. Is there a greater love than that? It is impossible that there could be.

Turn over back over to John 15, verse 10, please. We are building the case here for friendship and the foundation of friendship. This love is without beginning or end. It is without measure. It is without change. It is according to the measure of this great love and that is the love with which Christ loves us. Now, one thing more. First, we saw Jesus' declaration of His love for us. Second, we saw the measure of that love. And third, we have the challenge of love, which is in this case to continue it. If we continue in this love, then we remain in Him and prove ourselves fruitful.

The third word in this category of elements contributing to God's glory in this passage is obedience, though it is expressed in the challenge to keep Christ's commands, as has been done elsewhere.

John 15:10 "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love."

Are we tired of this emphasis? There certainly has been a lot of sermonette and sermons about love and there will continue to be. But do we get tired of hearing about love? I know sometimes I feel like, oh no, not, not another sermon on love. But there are so many aspects to it, so many important things. And this aspect I am directly applying to friendship to help narrow the subject more tightly. It may be that we are somewhat tired of the subject of love. But if we are, the fault is in us and not in the commands that Christ and God the Father have given us. Because as John says in his first epistle in I John 5:3, His commands are not burdensome. In Matthew 11:30, Matthew records Jesus as saying, "My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Then what is wrong? Probably what is wrong with us is that we are not as anxious to do Christ's commands as we would like to think we are; so the emphasis upon obedience exposes our halfhearted commitment to the will of Christ, and so gives birth to feelings of true guilt. We have to face ourselves.

What happens to us is precisely what happened to Peter when, following the resurrection, Christ was recommissioning him to service. Peter had denied Jesus three times in the presence of servants and soldiers in the courtyard of the high priest. So Christ recommissioned him with a threefold pattern. He asked him, "Simon son of John, do you love Me more than these?"

Please turn to John 21, verse 15, another section of Scripture that you are very, very familiar with. I think you will find reviewing the detail of this rewarding, so to speak, or at least enlightening. Peter was aware of his recent failure, but he did love Jesus. So he replied in genuine humility.

John 21:15 So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me [the word there in the Greek is *agapas*] more than these?" And he said to Him [this is Peter speaking], "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You [love there is *phileo*]." He said to him, "Feed My lambs."

Phileo means, "to be a friend to" (fond of [an individual or an object]), that is, have affection for (denoting personal attachment as a matter of sentiment or feeling). So what Peter was saying when he said to Christ, I *phileo* You, he was saying that I love You, I have affection, great affection, and emotional affection for You. It denotes personal attachment as a matter of sentiment or feeling.

While *agape* [*agapao*] which is another version of *agapas*, is wider, embracing especially the judgment and the deliberate ascent of the will as a matter of principle, duty, and propriety. The two are very closely related, however. The former, *phileo*, being chiefly of the heart, and the latter, *agapao*, of the head, specifically to love in a social or moral sense. That is what the *phileo* that Peter used means, to love in a social or moral sense.

Let us continue on verse 16.

John 21:16-17 He said to him again a second time, "Simon son of Jonah, do you love [that is *agapas*, that is "actively hold standards" is what that means. So Simon son of Jonah, "Do you actively hold standards, My standards?" is the meaning of that word there.] love [*agapas*] Me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You [meaning affection and cherish. "You know that I have affection and I cherish You."] And He said to him, "Tend My sheep." Then He said to him [this is Jesus], "Simon, son of Jonah; do you [*phileo*] Me? [Do you love Me? He changes the word from *agapao* to *phileo*. Why does he do that?] Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you *phileo* Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, you know all things; You know that I [*phileo*] You." And Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep."

Why was Peter grieved? Well, we know the answer to that. He was grieved because the third repetition reminded him of his threefold denial, and so awakened grief and true guilt for what he had done.

According to *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*,

The context itself indicates that *agape* in the first two sentences suggests the love that values and esteems. It is an unselfish love ready to serve. [That is the key, ready to serve.] The use of *phileo* in Peter's answers and Christ's third question conveys the thought of cherishing the Object [that is, Jesus Christ] above all else, of manifesting an affection characterized by constancy from the motive of the highest veneration [or reverence].

Wow, Peter really used a strong word for love many times. I have heard it said over the years that it was a far lesser word than *agapao*, which in a sense it is, in a spiritual sense. But it is not to be underestimated as his value in how much Peter loved Jesus Christ.

So, what Peter was answering to Christ's question as to whether he valued and honored Him by keeping His commandments was that he, Peter, had affection for Him as a friend, a dear, deep friend, his best Friend. However, Christ was asking Peter if he was of the attitude of upholding His standards

of righteousness and serving him unreservedly, wholeheartedly. And Peter seemed to be missing the point and so he affectionately answered that Jesus was his best friend and that he had deep feelings for Christ, which is not a bad thing whatsoever.

But he did not understand at that point what Christ was getting at. The difference, it seems, was as if Christ was asking Peter an intellectual question regarding duty and responsibility. And Peter was answering Christ with heartfelt friendship and affection and how much he cared for Christ.

And then the third time Christ changes His question to *phileo* and acknowledges Peter's emotional attachment and friendship to Him. And Christ knew that Peter had affections for Him and He knew that Peter knew it. But what Christ wanted to know was whether Peter is of the mindset to actively represent Christ by caring for His church, teaching God's way of life, that is, obedience to God's commandments, and continuing to be duty bound in promoting the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God. And He wanted Peter to confirm it to himself as well.

The *agapao* love that Christ was asking about was whether Peter had a resolute state of mind of obedience, commitment, and sacrifice to carry out Christ's commission for him.

Christian love has God for its primary object and expresses itself, first of all, in implicit obedience to His commandments. Protestantism, on the other hand, totally misunderstands the true meaning of *agapao*. Often they falsely believe that it is unconditional tolerance or a manipulation of another's affections. As Peter was reminded (and we need to be reminded as well), that that is the point of the repetition.

Notice this, I am going to just skim through five scriptures here.

John 14:15 "If you love Me obey My commandments."

John 14:21 "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me."

John 14:23 "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word."

John 15:10 "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love."

John 15:14 "You are My friends if you do what I command you."

How much clearer can it be than that? The point is obvious. We must keep Christ's commands if we are to be Christ's friends and grow in His love.

In the Scriptures, we are often reminded to obey all that Jesus has given us by way of instruction. But even as He tells us, Christ points out that He is asking us no more than He has already asked and given of Himself. "Just as I have obeyed My Father's commands and remain in His love."

We can be encouraged by this, knowing that the One who instructs us has Himself set the pattern and will give us strength to do as He requires. And that is the key. We cannot do it on our own. We have to have the strength that is given to us by God through Jesus Christ.

Back to John 15, verse 11, please. Now, in the last verse, Jesus introduces the fourth and final element that is to be in us and by which the Father is to be glorified. It is joy. It seems Christ adds it to indicate that His commands lead in the opposite direction from being grievous. Instead of being grievous, they are joyous and He is emphasizing that here. They lead to the fullness of that joy that is of God. And that is rightly listed as the second spiritual fruit in the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians.

Jesus says of this virtue,

John 15:11 "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full."

It is all positive—every bit of it—nothing negative. This sentence speaks of the Christian joy in three senses: attained joy, abiding joy, and abounding joy. Joy is to be attained as a result of the things Jesus had been teaching. And this is the reason why we must abide in Him so that the views, the

outlooks, and the aspirations of the Master will be those of the disciples as well. The disciples meaning you and I.

This is the reason for the twofold repetition of the word joy: My joy and your joy. The joy of Christ is to be the joy of the disciple. And His joy was a wonderful thing because it was not deferred by suffering or any other circumstance. In fact, it rejoiced in hardship because we read in Hebrews 12: 2 that Jesus, "for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross." Where did He find that joy? The answer is in His intense desire to do the will of the Father.

Psalm 16:8-9 [David says] I have set the Lord always before me, because He is at my right hand and I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices, my flesh also will rest in hope.

David was absolute in his faith and his joy and his love of the Father and Jesus Christ.

Second, the verse speaks of abiding joy, "that My joy may remain in you [or may be in you]." The point of this phrase is that joy does not necessarily remain. Many things can destroy it. Sin can destroy it, so can disobedience and unbelief or faithlessness. David confessed this while crying out to God,

Psalm 51:12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit.

We have access to that same Spirit and that same power and that same encouragement. It was not that his salvation was lost, only that the joy had evaporated. This always happens when we become separated from Christ in the sense of having the fellowship and friendship that once was ours broken. In contrast to this, we must abide in Him because when we abide in Him, the joy abides also.

Third, the verse speaks of abounding joy and this is the meaning of the clause, "and that your joy might be full [or it might be complete or lasting]." Christ wants all Christians to be more joyful. We should be able to rejoice in Christ even in the face of arrest, beatings, and death, as He did. When joy,

linked to fruitfulness, love, and obedience, is found in the life of a Christian, we know that it is Jesus Christ who does it as we abide in Him.

Continuing on in John 15.

John 15:12-14 "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command."

There is something pleasant about the word friend and friendship. It is due partly to our desire for a close friend or friends, and partly to our remembrance of them. We look at our past and we can almost mark the major periods of our lives by friends we have had. We think of the friends who went we went to school with and of the things we did with them. Not only did we make friends in school, but we also acquired friends throughout life at church and work and in our travels, and we had unforgettable experiences with them. If a person does not make new acquaintances as he progresses through life, he will eventually find himself left alone.

I read a statistic years ago that said that of people who retire, the ones who do the best, who live the longest, and are the happiest are the ones with lots of friends. It is this awareness that probably gives the verses to which we now come the special appeal, because in them Jesus Christ our Savior speaks of friendship in terms of our relationships to Him. He calls His friends saying, "Greater love has no man than this, than to lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you."

When Jesus says you are My friends, it is evident that He is speaking to us on the human level, in terms we can clearly understand. And He is doing so that we might contrast His friendship, which is great and perfect, to even the best of the other friendships we have known.

Turn with me to II Samuel 1, verse 26, please. The best known of the biblical examples is the friendship between Jonathan, the son of King Saul, and David, the young hero of Israel. Jonathan was in line for the throne, but David was so evidently blessed by God that the people were saying that he should be the next king. Here was a cause for great antagonism between the

apparent rights of the one and the supposed aspirations of the other. But there was no antagonism. Instead, there was a great and wonderful friendship. And at Jonathan's funeral, David somberly said this,

II Samuel 1:26 "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; you have been my you have been very pleasant to me; your love to me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women."

"My brother Jonathan." Jonathan there carries a double meaning because they were brothers-in-law. David was married to Michal, Jonathan's sister, and also they were brothers in heart and spirit. David and Jonathan were beloved friends who had covenanted together to share the throne. David as king and Jonathan as second in command. To read any perverse overtones into David's expressions of his love for Jonathan is to misinterpret his words. It is appalling that anyone would attempt to assume any perversion on their part. It shows the ignorance of people's understanding of the Hebrew idioms of the Bible.

In the Song of Solomon, chapter 8, verse 6, Solomon described the love of husband and wife as strong as death; and the friendship of David and Jonathan was that strong. I Samuel 18:1 in the NIV says, "Jonathan became one in spirit with David and he loved him as himself." It was a case in which each sacrificed in order to put the other's interests ahead of his own.

Sometimes the love that exists between one friend and another leads to the ultimate sacrifice of death. It is the ultimate of one's life because of such sacrifices. We understand what Christ is saying when he declares in clear reference to His own sacrifice, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."

On the other hand, it is not fair to talk about Jesus' sacrifice in merely human terms, because His death surpasses anything we can imagine. It may not happen often, but sometimes one human being will voluntarily die for another. Still, this gift never equals or even parallels Jesus' sacrifice. And we see this when we reflect on Jesus's death, as we have already in the sermon.

First, when we begin to reflect on Jesus' death, we recognize that His death was exceptional, if only because Jesus did not have to die in the sense that

He had a choice. That is not true of us. We are mortal, we *must* die. But Jesus was immortal and therefore did not have to die. Certainly, He was life itself, because He said in John 14:6, "I am the way and the truth and the life." Now he could have come into this world, performed a full and varied ministry, and then have returned to heaven without ever having experienced death.

On the other hand, of us it is said in Hebrews 9:27, "And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." What does this mean in terms of self-sacrifice? If you or I were to give our lives for someone else, while that would undoubtedly be a great and heroic sacrifice, it would nevertheless, at best, be merely an anticipation of what must eventually come anyway. We would simply be dying a bit sooner than normally.

Second, the death of Jesus Christ is exceptional in that He knew He would die. And this is not usually the case when a mere man or woman gives his or her life for another. Few who die in this way do so knowing in advance that they will die. Rather, it is usually the case that although the act is a risk and death is possible, they nevertheless think they may escape death while yet saving their friend. So people take calculated risks and sometimes die. But they do not often die deliberately. Jesus, by His own testimony, deliberately went to the cross to die for our our salvation.

Third, the love of Jesus Christ for His friends shines brighter than any love of which we are capable. John 15:14 says that we are Christ's friends and that He was going to give His life for His friends. But if we think about this, we must realize that when Jesus gave His life for us, strictly speaking we were not exactly His friends. True, He calls us friends. It also is true that we become His friends and that is what His anticipation was. He knew who would be His and who would be His friends, but we become friends because of His act, because of his electing grace toward us, manifesting itself in the atonement and in the ministry of His Spirit by which our natural rebellion against God is overcome and our hearts are drawn to love and serve Christ.

Go with me to Romans 5, please. When He died for us, or if we go back farther, when in eternity past He determined to die for us, He did so while we were yet enemies, or we are foreseen to be enemies.

Romans 5:8 [Paul writes] But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

So when we see ourselves as God sees us, then the surpassing worth of the love of Christ becomes evident. It diminishes our own love to something that is so slight that it is almost unrecognizable, but it is the love of God in us that is recognizable and is great and powerful and effective.

The opening chapter of Romans deals with man's sin, showing how all men and women have possessed a certain knowledge of God but have turned from that knowledge in order to worship a God of their own devising. Paul says that a certain knowledge of the existence and power of God is disclosed in nature and in the consciences of all men and women, but human beings have rejected that knowledge flat out, not only rejected it, but have tried to erase it and turn their back on it. Paul says,

Romans 1:21-23 Because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.

There are certain consequences of this, as John 15 goes on to show. Humanity has given up God. So Paul says, in a certain sense, God has given us up and He has given us up to certain consequences. Three times in this chapter, we read that God "gave them over." So when before we are called into the church and are baptized and receive God's Holy Spirit, God gives the world over to certain things in every case.

However, in every case, we are told what God gave them over to. This is important because it is not as if God were holding humanity in His hand and then let go with the result that humanity simply drifted off into nowhere. If I let go of an object, the object falls. I have not given it up to nothing. I have given it up to the law of gravity and the law of gravity draws it downward. In the same way, God gives us over to the bad consequences of our rebellion. Paul mentions three:

The first one he mentions is that God has given us over, before our conversion, to sexual impurity.

Romans 1:24 Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lust of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves.

That is, when we turn our backs on God who is perfect in His purity, we inevitably become filthy spiritually.

The second is that God has given us over, that is, before conversion, to shameful lusts.

Romans 1:26 For this reason, God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature.

That is, the good affections we have that we rightly cherish become warped because they are severed from their source. Love becomes lost. A proper sense of responsibility becomes the driving pride of personal ambition and self-sacrifice becomes selfishness, and so on.

Third, God says that He has given us over to a depraved mind.

Romans 1:28 And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting.

This means that we have developed a way of thinking that is antagonistic toward God so that we are constantly devising philosophies and actions that try to eliminate His presence from our lives, speaking from the point of view of being human.

These important verses from Romans give God's assessment of humanity. He made us more than this. He made us in His own image. But we have rebelled against Him and defaced that image and these are the consequences.

Please go forward to Romans 5. Instead of God's glory, we have advanced man's depravity. Instead of His sovereignty, we have sought human autonomy. Instead of holiness, we have sinned. And instead of love, hate. Yet despite our depravity, Christ came to be our friend and prove His friendship by dying for us.

Romans 5:6-8 For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

There is another essential question that arises from John 15. Is Jesus your friend? This is the question that emerges from John 15:13, in which Jesus speaks of His love and therefore of His friendship for us. But in the next verse, we have what might be called the flipside of that question. And it is, are you Christ's friend? Jesus suggests this when He declares,

John 15:14 "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you."

How could you or I do that—love as He loves, give ourselves as He gave Himself. It is impossible for us to die spiritually for someone else as He did, the main thing that makes His death so fantastic, so awesome, so great. If Jesus had required us to do all He did, it would be impossible to become His friend. But He did not say that. Instead, He put the requirements in our terms and on our level. Paraphrased, He said, "You can be My friends if you do what I command you. If you do, would I command you?" This means that we are to show our friendship to Him by simple obedience. I do not use that word, simple, lightly. There is a lot involved in it. But the idea is simple. Simple obedience means that it must be active, continuous, and in all things.

First, our obedience must be active because Jesus said, "You are My friends if you do. . ." Sadly, some Christians talk about God's way of life as though it consisted largely in refusing to do certain things. If we fall into that way of thinking, we imagine that after we have refused to watch certain things on TV, refuse to seek our own pleasure on the Sabbath, refuse to have

extramarital sex, refuse to lie in our jobs, and so on, that we have done a great deal. But we have not. We have obeyed negatively but not positively.

Christ calls upon us to love one another and that cannot be done except in very practical ways. We are also to pray. We are to worship with other Christians, our spiritual friends. Our Christian lives are to be demonstrated by good deeds. In prayer ask God what practical things He would like you to do. What would you like me to do, Christ? What would you like me to do, Father? Please let me know. Sometimes we get the answer from other friends, other spiritual friends.

Second, our obedience should also be continuous. Jesus did not say "if you do what I command and then quit" or "if you do it when you feel like it." The verb is a present subjunctive meaning, "if you are doing is what Christ is saying." It is ongoing. The idea is of continuous action, day after day, year after year, and there is no vacation from being a disciple of Jesus Christ. There is no day off.

Third, our obedience is to be in all things, because Christ says, "if you do whatever I command you." It means going to Him in love to do *all* He asks us of us, not picking and choosing as some do, not exalting those aspects of God's way of life we like and neglecting those we dislike. It is not a smorgasbord. Instead, it means going to Him with yielded humility of mind and body and asking God, "What will You have me do?" It is only when we ask that question and mean it that we find ourselves being lifted up to do what a friend of God does.

Turn over to John 15, verse 15, please. It is not enough to just ask, "Is Jesus Christ your friend?" Now we must ask, "Are you Jesus Christ's friend by this definition?" that we have been going through.

John 15:15-17 "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. 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, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. These things I command you, that you love one another."

Apart from chapter 15 in John's gospel in which Christ calls His disciples friends, I do not know of any other characters in the Bible who are called friends of God except Abraham. But this one case is significant because the nature of the relationship of God to Abraham is an illustration of the main point of Christ's teaching here. Abraham is called "the friend of God" in James 2:23. And the reference in James is either to II Chronicles 20:7, in which Abraham is called "Your friend," Your being God. Or Isaiah 41:8, in which Abraham is called "My friend," or whether it's a reference to both "Your friend" or "My friend."

So the significance of the term is in the fact that God spoke freely to Abraham and consequently repeated openly His mind to him. The classic example is God's conversation with Abraham just before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this conversation, God said in Genesis 18:17, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing?" The answer was no, because the story goes on to record how God revealed the coming destruction to Abraham, opened his mind to Him, and how Abraham, knowing that Lot was in Sodom, interceded for the righteous who lived in those cities.

Communication is essential to friendship. Friends speak to one another, they bear their souls and tell their troubles. They share their aspirations. It is no surprise then that in the upper room, in the midst of those conversations in which Jesus calls His disciples friends, the Lord of Glory shares His thoughts with them. And already He has done this in reference to His death and resurrection, heaven, the coming of the Holy Spirit after His ascension, and other doctrines.

And now He does so in reference to His special calling of them to fruitful service. He declares that His disciples are His friends because He said in John 15:15, "I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you." That is important. Christ communicates.

One thing that characterizes our friendships is autonomy in choosing whom we will befriend and whom we will not befriend. Usually that exercise of autonomy is mutual for the persons involved. You have heard of the etiquette greeting, "I'm delighted to make your acquaintance." Somebody you know slightly rather than intimately is an acquaintance, not yet a friend. Second,

we may like the other person but he or she may not like us or vice versa. In that case, also, no friendship develops unless of course the one who dislikes the other changes his or her mind. And third, there may be a mutual attraction. It is only in this latter situation that the people involved become friends. And this means that we have a choice in the matter. And so does the other person and we consider this essential to friendship.

Yet, in striking contrast to our understanding of the matter in these verses, Jesus stresses that we have become His friends, not because we choose Him (because we did not), but because He in His great mercy chose us. The friendship is established only when God acts in Christ to remove the barrier. And it is only after He has spoken of laying down His life for us, that Christ speaks of His disciples as His friends.

There is another difference. It is seen in the purpose clause of verse 16, "I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit." Why? Because you are His friend. And in the command that follows, "I command you that you love one another." So "go and bear fruit" and "love one another" are synonymous. They are one and part of the same.

It seems strange from our conception of friendship that Jesus speaks of choosing His friends so that they might do something and immediately follow His declaration of friendship with a command. We would not think of choosing a friend for what he or she could do. Humanly, that sounds calculating and dishonorable. Also, we would not think of commanding our friend to do something. At least not if we wanted to retain him as our friend. You meet somebody, you like them, they like you. And you say, "Look, this is what I want you to do." And you give them a list of hard things to do.

The reason for Christ's method is in the nature of the friendship involved. This spiritual friendship is not a friendship between two equals, but between sinful and limited human beings and God. Consequently, the full dimensions of that relationship (which always involve our sin, ignorance and limitations, as well as God's holiness, omniscience and sovereignty), are involved. We are God's friends by grace. But that does not mean that we can approach God as His equal or dictate the terms of the friendship. It means that we must approach Him in gratitude and humility, always bearing in mind that the friendship exists because of His superior love.

Having placed the matter of friendship in the proper perspective, Christ goes on to disclose the privileges of that friendship in terms of a life of fruitful Christian service. And he discloses the privileges of that friendship in terms of a life of fruitful Christian service. Here in John 15, verse 16, the purpose clause emerges not as a qualification upon the nature of the friendship, though in one sense it is that, but rather as the glorious privilege and destiny of all whom Jesus Christ calls friends,

John 15:16 "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, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you."

This statement of purpose has two parts, each of which is introduced by the important Greek word *hina*, translated "that" or "in order that," denoting the purpose or the result. First, that they might be fruitful and second, that their prayers might be answered, or we could say in order that they might be fruitful or in order that their prayers might be answered.

This is not the first time the word fruit has occurred in chapter 15, but it carries the understanding of fruitfulness a step farther than any of the previous occurrences of fruitfulness. There is a fourfold progression in the bearing of fruit. Let me give those to you.

In the first part of verse 2, Christ speaks merely of fruit. There is no qualifying adjectives, just fruit. His teaching is that it is the purpose of the vine's branches to bear fruit and that he is concerned that they do. So, the fruit is primarily those aspects of character that are produced in our lives as believers because of God's Spirit empowering us.

As I mentioned earlier, Galatians 5:22-23 describe some of those aspects of character as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In a secondary sense, the word fruit may also refer to good works which flow from these characteristics. And of course, there is the weaker sense in that it is to the converts of God's church; that we bear fruit when people are converted as a result of our efforts and the efforts of God the Father and Jesus Christ through us.

The second progression is that in the second half of John 15:2, Christ adds a modifier to the word fruit. "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit." More is a searching word. The reason it is searching is that as churches and individuals we are in danger of the tendency of self-contentment, of having a lukewarm attitude. It is the secret spirit of we are rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing, and it prevails where it is not suspected. If this is the case, we are spiritually poor, blind, and naked.

Now, there is little response where it is most needed. So we cannot be content with little fruit regardless of past blessings. There is always more that God has for us in growth of Christian character service, witnessing, and other blessings.

The third progression is that seven verses farther, in verse 8, we have another modifier. This time Jesus Christ says in John 15:8, "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, so you so you will be My disciples." Christians often seem to want little to happen perhaps because they consider much of anything to be worldly, including spiritual growth and successes sometimes. But whatever the reason, it is certain that Christ is thinking in different terms here because here He speaks of "much fruit" and of the fact that much fruit rather than merely fruit or more fruit is to glorify it through the glory of God. And so we must strive to achieve much knowing that little brings little glory either to the Father or to the Son.

And then the fourth in this progression. Finally, in verse 16, we come to the last stage in this progression. It is fruit that will last. John 15:16, "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 [that is, abide, last, or continue], that where whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you."

Not all fruit does last. In fact, in purely agricultural terms, no fruit really lasts. Pears perish; apples rot; berries, oranges, and grapefruits spoil. In human terms, much that we do also belongs in this category. We work but much of our work and the fruits of that work pass away. In time, we will ourselves pass away. So the question is, does anything last? One thing

remains and that is the fruit produced in the life of the Christian by Jesus Christ. He is eternal and therefore His work is also eternal and will never perish.

So, is Christ at work in you? Or is it just you working? Look at the fruit and see if it is spiritual fruit or whether it is physical fruit that will not last, and you will have your answer.

We should pause and ask, what are we accomplishing? What are we producing in preparation for eternity? We should remember that it is possible to build great monuments out of wood, stone, and steel. But these do not last. Spiritual fruit produced in us by God's Spirit does last.

Let us move on to the second purpose of Christ calling us to be His friends, which is that John 15:16 says, "The Father will give you whatever you shall ask in My [that is, Christ's] name." This is a reminder and an inducement to pray. Christ has encouraged it several times already in chapters 14 and 15 of John's gospel. The promise is repeated because we need to be reminded to pray because we have a tendency to be lax in our life of prayer.

But considering the context in which Jesus speaks of this new friendship and of His command that we love one another, it seems that Christ is thinking here of the specific type of prayer known as intercession. Intercession is prayer, that is, prayer for others. What should be more natural for those of us who have been brought into this great Family of God than that we should pray earnestly for those others who are also Christ friends. If they are Christ friends, then they are our friends too, and we must pray for them, as indeed they must pray for us.

Now, the last verse of this section, John 15, verse 17 returns to the theme with which verses 12 through 17 began, and that is to love one another. It is not the first time that this command has been given. Jesus said in John 13:34-35, "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Three times in two verses, He emphasizes that, therefore, it is of the utmost importance. It is essential in the next chapter, chapter 14. Christ speaks

frequently of our need to love Him. Then here in chapter 15, we read in John 15:12, "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

Turn over to I John 4. John himself learned this because in imitation of Jesus, he repeats the command in his first letter to the churches of Asia.

I John 4:7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

He repeats just four verses later in verse 11, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." And then a third time in verse 12, "No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us."

We are to love one another because of God's great love toward us and because of Christ's command, to we love one another within the bond of friendship created by Jesus Christ and according to His own love and standards. Are we loving according to our own standards and what we can get out of the relationship?

For a final scripture, turn with me to Job 42, verse 10. Let me list some of the things that love within friendship does.

The first one: Love prays for the other. Job is a significant example. Job lost all that he valued, including his family, wealth, and property. In his misery, his "friends" turned against him, though pretending to give comfort. If anyone ever had a right to spurn friendship, unfriend, or defriend someone, it was Job. Yet at the end of the story, after God intervened to disclose His true purpose and reveal His anger at the counsel of Job's friends, you read that Job prayed and that God blessed Job greatly. For whom did job pray?

Job 42:10 And the Lord restored Job's losses when he prayed for his friends. Indeed the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before [when he prayed for his friends].

The second item or thing that love within friendship does is: Love sticks close to a friend, especially when the friend is in trouble. Solomon knew

what it is to have a friend who sticks close because he wrote in Proverbs 18:24, "A man who has friends must himself be friendly, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." He indicates the same thing a chapter earlier, saying in Proverbs 17:17, "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity."

The third thing that love within friendship does is: Love also gives and receives. This double activity is seen in Christ's parable of the two friends, one of whom visited the other in the night to say in Luke 11:5-6, "And he said to them, 'Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey; and I have nothing to set before him."

In the context of Christ's parable, the friend who is in bed is reluctant to get up and give to the one asking, yet he eventually does because he is his friend. The point being the superior worth of the friendship of God who gives to everyone liberally and is not hard to be to plead with. So the parable ends in Luke in 11:9, where it says, "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it will be open to you."

So we have a friend in Christ and in God the Father and They act as the best friend anyone could ever have. They are there when we have need. It does not matter what time of day it is, it does not matter what the situation is. We have a friend forever. That is the ultimate friend.

My emphasis here is not to stress the willingness of God to give, though that is a valuable lesson here, but rather to show the nature of that friendship that goes out of its way to supply what another needs. I am not implying that we should only spend time in prayer. If it is within our power to give to those who are in need, we must act.

On the other hand, if we are thinking spiritually, we know that we have nothing to give of ourselves. We cannot meet the other's spiritual need. Yet, by God's grace, we have a friend Jesus Christ who can meet those needs. And sometimes Christ does it through one friend to the other.

If we pray, recognizing our own need, Christ will provide all that the friend of that friend of ours (who is therefore also a friend of His) lacks. Therefore, we must love and give and pray.

To be true friends on a spiritual level, we must first be friends of Christ. Are you God's eternal friend or are you just a fair weather friend?

May God help you to build wonderful and strong friendships!