

ON THE NATURE OF FRIENDSHIP

**1 Samuel 18:1-4; Proverbs 17:9 and
17; Job 17:5; John 15:13-15**

Love is Loyalty

By

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Opening.

A definition of friendship from the 19th century {1859}: “Friendship is the comfort, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person, having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but pouring all right out just as they are, chaff and wheat together, certain that a faithful, friendly hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping and, with a breath of comfort, blow the rest away.” That was for the ladies.

Now, for the men: “A *friend* will help you move; a *good* friend will help you move a body.”

A more technical definition for ‘friendship’ would be: “The state of being friends; friendly relation or attachment to a person or between persons; affection arising from mutual esteem and good will; ...aptness to unite; ...affinity; harmony; correspondence.” Which translates, at least in my understanding, into *communication*. Without it, clear and honest communication, without a knowing of heart and mind, love between two people cannot flourish. The same thing can be said for freedom as the arena of love. If love is forced, coerced, or manipulated— mentally, physically, emotionally, psychologically— it ceases to be love and has become some other animal entirely.

George Washington once said, “True friendship is a plant of slow growth, and must undergo and withstand the shocks of adversity before it is entitled to the appellation.”

The incredibly creative Christian author and philosopher C.S. Lewis said, “Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art.... It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things that gives value to survival.” In speaking to the various kinds of love represented in the language of Classical Greece he said, “Eros will have naked bodies; friendship naked personalities.”

Essay— Love is Loyalty.

The Scriptures declare in Proverbs 17:17, that “**a true friend is always loyal, and a brother is born to help in time of need,**” {TLB}. I was reminded of the precarious nature of friendship within the confines of a fallen world by a number of different things in the past few weeks. One was a phone call I made to a friend, someone whom I’d known and loved in days past, someone I’d spent much time with, talked and laughed with, with whom I’d engaged the enemy for the Cause of our King. And like many men, and many modern women, can testify: someone with whom I now have little to no contact. The phone call, like many others I’d made over the years, consisted of me asking a concerned question about how this is going or that person is doing, how’s the marriage, how’s your heart, how can I pray ...followed by essentially monosyllabic answers. With a minor variation on that theme every now and then. Not exactly what you’d call inspiring and reassuring, is it?

What’s up with that, man? Why do we let the enemy sneak in with a word of malice

and slander, a fable and fabrication, and rob us of what is most dear to us? Because he will, you know. He is **“the thief”** who **“comes only to steal, kill and destroy”** {Jn. 10:10a}. He **“was a murderer from the beginning ...he is a liar and the father of lies,”** John 8:44c. Or did you think that was just a metaphor Jesus is using, He didn't really mean it. Unfortunately, that's exactly what many Christians think. That's how they live anyway— as if there is no enemy, there is no Battle, and I don't really need to 'armor up' day after day. And they wonder why joy, celebration and strength never seem to come.

Let's not kid ourselves. Those of us safely ensconced within the Kingdom of Christ are no different than the rest of the world. In fact, the world outside the walls of the Church may be better, maybe *much* better, at faithfulness in friendships. The divorce rates within Christendom would argue that we are *horrendous* at cultivating deep, meaningful, loving, *lasting* relationships. Would it not? Notice as Jesus is laying down His single greatest command for us in John 15:13, that we **“love each other”** as He has loved us {v. 12}, He says, **“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command,”** v. 14. Jesus is saying the most powerful love one person can have for another, the most *profound* display of the heart of God in the life of man, is when a person— man or woman, young or old, black or white, yellow or red— lays down their life for one they love. And in that same arena of **“love”** Jesus proclaims our undying friendship with Him by our obedience to Him. **“If you obey Me, if you do what I command.”** He already laid down His Life for us, each and every one without exception; what He asks in return is the obedience of love.

Immediately, through the words of Jesus, we see that friendship involves [1] selflessness and sacrifice, that friendship involves [2] respect for the other's will, intellect and emotions, and that [3] within reasonable bounds even a desire to obey their wishes. In the case of Christ, we would say obedience instantly and unconditionally. The point is not that we become slaves of our friends, as someone is sure to misconstrue my words, but that when we love someone we long to please them. It's the very nature of love. It's the grand and glorious shift at the heart of our motivation in obeying Jesus' Commands... out of desire and not merely duty, out of love, not law. For one is worthwhile and the other is worth-less. Until that shift takes place, our relationship with *Abba* will be *fueled* by fear and *clouded* by confusion. Mark it down. Jesus say's in v. 15, **“I no longer call you servants [doulos- 'slaves, bond-slaves'], because a servant, a slave does not know his Master's business [masters don't normally confide in slaves]. Instead I have called you friends ['My friends,' TLB], for everything that I learned from My Father I have made known to you.”** This is the final aspect of friendship from this short section of Scripture: [4] the sharing of wisdom one heart to another, the passing on of secrets well worth knowing, the sharing of things which are powerful and profound.

Proverbs 17:9 offers us even deeper insight; it says, **“He who covers over an offense [Hebrew verb *kasah* means- 'cover or conceal,' but also to 'forgive'] promotes love [We can see from the context this is protecting someone we love rather than shouting**

their indiscretion from the rooftop. It may very well be that they have offended us and we've chosen to forgive and to speak of it no more. Notice the contrast:], **but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends** [‘alienates a friend’],” {NIV}. Ooohhh, owwww, that one gets right down to the core of where we live and breathe, to the walk we walk and the smack we talk, doesn't it? I don't mean boasting, bragging, and machismo here; I mean gossip, unfair and unjust criticism, character assassination, slanderous accusations. You getting the picture? Pretty prominent themes in the Word.

David and Jonathan— How Two Souls Became as One.

The Bible has much to say about the nature of a friend, the concept of friendship, and about the faithfulness, honor, and commitment necessary to build {yes 'build'} strong and lasting friendships, like the story of David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 18 and ff. Who would have ever thought, right? “I mean, it is a book of ancient wisdom, divinely inspired, but we don't really build our lives and marriages, our friendships and families, around it today. That's ridiculous.” And that kind of practical atheism is precisely the problem.

1 Samuel 18 says, **“After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David** [NAS has, ‘the soul of Jonathan was *knit* to the soul of David’], **and he loved him as himself. From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return to his father's house. 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,”** vv. 1-4. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* contains this incredible commentary on the soul of Jonathan. It says, “Rare natures like that of Jonathan seldom attain to the highest place [I.e., rarely are they kings and governors, power-brokers and money-mongers. Because of who he was Jonathan didn't fight David for the throne, or the power, wealth, and prestige of the kingship. He set aside his own ambition for the will of God and the future of His People.], and records of their lives are all too few [You know why? Cause nobody records who came in second place!]. But as they pass through the world, they strengthen man's faith in humanity, and they leave behind them a fragrance that endures.”¹ *Amen*. It's people like Jonathan, a Warrior and a Lover, a man whose soul was equal in greatness to David's, but whose life is not recorded in the same length and breadth because he never took the throne, he never ruled from the heights of Jerusalem. The kingdom of Israel, rightfully his as the firstborn son of Saul, he passed willingly to David. And that, my friends, is true greatness... the beauty and the glory of humility, of trust in the heart of *Yahweh*, in something greater than the fulfillment of my personal ambition, my deep and desperate need for immediate gratification!

Here's a little more modern paraphrase of this passage from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson. **“By the time David had finished reporting to Saul, Jonathan was deeply impressed with David— an immediate bond was forged between them. He became totally committed to David. From that point on he would**

be David's number-one advocate and friend. ...Jonathan, out of his deep love for David, made a covenant with him. He formalized it with solemn gifts: his own royal robe and weapons— armor, sword, bow, and belt," vv. 3-4. I know what all the ladies are thinking, "What's up with the 'weapons' thing? Why do men always have to give weapons... why can't it be a nice card, or some bubble bath, or a din-din at their favorite restaurant?" Haaaaa haa haa *Because* ...the only thing men love more than weapons {heterosexual men, that is} is women! Does that help?

To see the import of this, you have to understand the phenomenal extravagance of this gift. This is more than just a royal robe easily replaced or a coat of arms to be forged anew. In a time shortly before this, because of an iron embargo by the Philistine Pentapolis {the five city-states of Gaza, Akron, Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Gath} the *only* warriors in Israel's army to own sword and spear, the only two men to charge into battle truly and fully armed were Saul and Jonathan— 1 Samuel 13:19-22. Starting to make a little more sense? The selflessness of this gift, one warrior {the king's son} to another warrior {the King's chosen one}, is incredible. This is a gift of royalty, one man with the heart of a king giving a gift of lavishness and generosity to the man destined to be king ... and to take his very place on the throne of Israel {remember, Jonathan is Saul's firstborn (1 Sam. 14:49): the kingdom would rightfully belong to him}. The lessons here are lessons of wisdom and honor in the eyes of God, of selflessness and sacrifice, of putting others before me, of faithfulness in friendship.

Wikipedia's article on friendship states, that the "value... found in friendships is often the result of a friend demonstrating the following on a consistent basis:

- *The tendency to desire what is best for the other* {check};
- *Sympathy and empathy* {check};
- *Honesty, perhaps in situations where it may be difficult for others to speak the truth, especially in terms of pointing out the perceived faults of one's counterpart* {check};
- *Mutual understanding* {check};
- *Mutual compassion* {check}."

The Phenomena of Failing Friendships.

As I thought about this phenomena of failing friendships, like plants left to die on a windowsill with no water {"Geez, I thought it needed Sunlight to thrive." It does; it also needs *water*, and no dog eating its leaves and no cat taking swipes at it!}, two things became clear. One is that the spiritual / theological / ecclesiological movement I was trained in, the same background from which many of us have emerged, did not place a premium on relationships. In fact, relationships quite frankly were disposable. When someone no longer suits you, agrees with you, bows down to your dictates, moves from your political positions or social opinions... boom, that's it. Gone, done, over with, we cut 'em off and move on. A *horribly* unhealthy approach to relationships *and*— I might add— terribly unholy. When people become less important than propositions,

when souls are submerged beneath seas of anger and abusiveness, self-righteousness and self-justification, we've reached the point of ugly and unholy religion— with a capital R. **We simply were not taught that relationships, and thus the hearts inside the people in our periphery, were important.** And that's a shame, a tragedy even, of epic proportions.

And two, as men in our modern and post-modern culture we are given almost no insight, teaching or training in how to forge lasting friendships. We're not told that friendships, like all relationships, take time, emotional effort, thoughtful energy extended toward those we love. Our consumerist culture hones us in like a Predator Drone to things like safety, luxury, and decadence. So when the hard thing comes, or even the mildly unpleasant thing, even the little-bit-uncomfortable-thing, we're completely unprepared for it. *And we bail.* That is the story of men in America in the 21st century. And that may be the greatest tragedy of all, an insufferable shame. For every time we turn our backs on a friend, every time we fail to love and love well, to live and live free, to battle courageously and to speak compassionately, we teach a younger generation— our children, our grandchildren, and those we're apprenticing to Jesus— that these things are unimportant. A detail to be glossed over whenever it's convenient. Minor matters at best.

Finale.

As Job said in the midst of his suffering, **“If a man denounces his friends for reward, the eyes of his children will fail;”** as *The Message* has it, **“Those who betray their own friends leave a legacy of abuse to their children,”** 17:5. This will not do for those who long above all else to follow in the Master's footsteps. It *cannot* suffice in the Master's Way. We will learn this lesson or we will perish: alone and abandoned. It's as simple as that. Time and time again through the years I've heard people say {usually with an elitist attitude, a self-satisfied demeanor}, “Well, I don't need friends.” Yeah, and that's probably why you don't have any. In the end, it's not really about whether we 'need' them or not, is it? But whether our souls are generous enough to give the gift of true friendship, spacious enough to make room for someone besides ourselves.

So, where is the state of your soul today? Is it generous enough to offer this kind of gift, is it spacious enough for others to find safety and security in? What kind of home would your heart make if someone needed to rest there... to rest and be restored? The answer to that will tell you **all you need to know about who you truly are.**

Make our hearts, Lord, like unto the hearts of David and Jonathan— pure and powerful in Your sight, bound together in the Cause of the Great King, Jesus Christ. In Your holy and beautiful Name... Amen.

¹: *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 287, {Bracketed Commentary Mine}