

Do Your Friendships Live Out the Gospel?



by JONATHAN HOLMES

We all know that even our best efforts at friendship can go wrong. We have all been burned, rejected, cast off, and ignored by people who we would like to know better. For most of us, there have even been times when our best efforts to be vulnerable and transparent only leave us more lonely and empty than before. Alas, deep and meaningful friendships don't come easily. They can be perplexing, frustrating, and discouraging. And that is true even within the church—and sometimes *especially* within the church.

As a pastor of a large church, I have talked with many people about friendship and encountered many questions about it. A lot of those conversations have come about because people are wondering if friendship should be different among Christians in the church. I have interacted with people as they wrestle with questions such as these:

- If a group of people are all saved and adopted into God's family, then why can it seem so hard to form open, honest, and genuine friendships in the church?
- Jesus said believers will be recognized by their love for one another. What is that supposed to look like? Whatever it is, why don't we see more of it?

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- What are realistic expectations for biblical friendship? What should I be hoping for, and how can I get there?

Other people ask about the personal side:

- None of my church friendships go below the surface, but we enjoy them anyway. What's wrong with just keeping the status quo?
- Should it concern me that there's still no one in my church who actually knows me well?
- Will I ever have people in my life who truly accept me for the mess that I am? Or is it unrealistic and selfish of me to want that?

As you have thought about your friendships, perhaps you have asked similar questions.

In this article, I will address these questions. I will do so by describing biblical friendship: what it is and what it is not, how it is formed, and what threatens it.¹ But as the first and most important step, be encouraged in your friendship with Jesus Christ. Our Savior died for you so he could call *you* a friend! He is *the* faithful friend. Ask him for the ability to understand biblical friendship better, and as a result to receive the grace and courage to pursue others with a glad heart.

Let me now present my definition for *biblical friendship*.

Beyond Fellowship: Biblical Friendship Defined

Christian fellowship is a mark of the church. And though a strong culture of fellowship within a church can help minimize the sense of isolation faced by individual believers, I'd like to distinguish *Christian fellowship* from *biblical friendship*.

Fellowship is a truly wonderful thing. It is companionship and love among believers based on our unity in Christ. But though biblical friendships include fellowship, they have added depth through active investment in one another's lives. Here's an expanded version of the same idea:

Biblical friendship exists when two or more people, bound together by a common faith in Jesus Christ, pursue him and his kingdom with intentionality and vulnerability.

¹ If you are interested in delving into the topic of biblical friendship in greater detail, I have written a book on the subject. See *The Company We Keep: In Search of Biblical Friendships* (Cruciform Press: 2014).

Rather than serving as an end in itself, biblical friendship serves primarily to bring glory to Christ, who brought us into friendship with the Father. It is indispensable to the work of the gospel, and an essential element of what God created us for.

I hope you find that both inspiring and a little bit intimidating!

Perhaps it will help to know that the idea of biblical friendship arose within God himself. It is not a product of human agreement and alliance. The unity we can experience within biblical friendships is a reflected unity, an image of the Trinity's perfect and eternal relationship. True biblical friendship is embodied in the Trinity and, since we are made in God's image and brought into relationship with him through Christ, we, too, are empowered to have these friendships. Indeed, friendship is intended to be a spiritual discipline among God's people that brings glory to him.

Biblical friendship is not merely meant to enhance our individual lives, but to serve as an essential instrument in the accomplishment of God's purposes. Through these friendships, God purposes to display gospel unity in a divisive world. Believers in unity with one another mirror the Trinity, and that unity serves as a divine witness to the world. Thus, biblical friendships carry within them something greater and more awesome than you may have ever imagined. By demonstrating unity in a world characterized by division, they tell the story of the gospel in a way nothing else can. It is no longer just a story in an ancient book, but is lived out by the people who follow and serve Christ.

God also uses biblical friendships to show us (and the world) our need for his grace. He does not take us out of the world or insulate us from the troubles, challenges, and temptations we will face in these relationships. But to bear witness to the truth of the gospel, these friendships will not be perfect and they don't have to be. They just have to prove themselves genuine by enduring through the ups and downs, the successes and failures, and by depending on the everlasting hope and tangible spiritual change that Christ brings to living in a fallen world. With beautiful and brutal honesty, biblical friendships reflect the story of the life-changing and hope-giving gospel.

We will now turn to a discussion of what biblical friendship looks like in life lived.

What Biblical Friendship Is

For much of high school, I struggled to make friends. A self-acknowledged introvert, I faced the garden-variety struggles of wanting to fit in, be liked, and be accepted. Most of my friendships were cordial and warm, but largely superficial. As it came time to leave for college, I was angst-ridden at the prospect of starting all over again with a new group of people.

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My first year at college was tough. I was determined to reinvent myself—especially when it came to relationships. I tried to be funny, spontaneous, and easy-going. As the school year finished out, however, I was exhausted. Was friendship supposed to be *this* difficult? It dawned on me that friendship isn't so much a series of things we need to *do*. Friendship is more about being a friend, not trying to get one. This realization led to huge positive changes for me. For the rest of college I not only forged lasting friendships, but also met my best friend and future wife. I learned that friendship flourishes best when we seek to *be* and *embody* the type of friend we see in God himself.

Since then, my interest in friendships has only increased and I've continued to explore the topic. I have found that there is no better book in the Bible from which to glean wisdom about human relationships than Proverbs. The writers of Proverbs are deeply interested in relationships, and friendships in particular, because this is where wisdom is tested and worked out.

Drawing from the Proverbs' well of wisdom on relationships, Tim Keller identifies four characteristics that distinguish wise friendships:² constancy, candor, carefulness, and counsel.

Let's explore each one.

² Tim Keller, "Friendship," accessed May 26, 2016, <http://www.gospelinlife.com/friendship-5400>.

Constancy. In our culture, the concept of friendship has become increasingly disposable and fleeting. But Proverbs portrays biblical friendship as constant and abiding. “There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Prov 18:24). In an ancient Near Eastern culture where family was everything, this is a provocative statement. There is a sense in Proverbs, and throughout the storyline of the Bible, that a true biblical friend can be depended on through good and bad times, in prosperity or adversity.

Look at the classic story of friendship between David and King Saul’s son, Jonathan. To be a friend to David, Jonathan—who was not a blood relative of David’s—risked his princely crown, his kingly inheritance, and even his life. But regardless of whether David was in or out favor with the king, Jonathan’s friendship with David never wavered.

This mark of constancy reminds me of Frodo and Sam from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. One of the keys to Frodo’s success is the constancy of Sam’s friendship. Several times, Frodo tries to carry the burden of the ring and complete the journey to Mt. Doom alone, and yet each time Sam’s persistence and faithfulness keep Frodo from deadly isolation. Sam allows no adversity to come between him and his commitment to Frodo.

It should not surprise us that this characteristic of constancy ties back to our friendship with God. He is the one who is a constant and faithful presence in our lives. He is the friend who is a refuge in time of trouble and a shelter in time of storm.

Candor. A second characteristic of a biblical friendship highlighted in Proverbs is candor. Candor is the ability to speak truth in love for the good of your friend. Proverbs 27:5–6 says, “Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.” It may seem like this doesn’t make sense: don’t wounds hurt and kisses feel good? Yet somehow a biblical friend is willing to wound us, and those wounds are actually for our good. Constructive wounds, even open rebuke, are shown to be a mark of true faithfulness, an expression of love that refuses a false sense of peace. Silence in the face of a brother or sister’s folly is no act of love, but the wounds of correction *are*, however uncomfortable it may be to inflict them.

Proverbs 28:23 adds to the picture. “Whoever rebukes a man will af-

terward find more favor than he who flatters with his tongue.” Once again, uncomfortable honesty wins out over the path of least resistance. One can infer from these proverbs that if you are unwilling to offend by speaking candidly in the context of a friendship, you probably are not being a biblical friend.

Nothing has played a more important role in my friendships than this kind of confrontation in love. One particularly vivid example for me involves a time I was stringing Christmas lights from our second-story window. As I leaned out the window into an unforgiving northeast Ohio winter, my wife stood below offering one suggestion after another. They were all reasonable suggestions, and made with a perfectly good attitude. Yet I could feel my blood boiling. *Just figure out where you want the lights!* When the job was finished, I spent the rest of the evening storming around the house, trying to make it perfectly clear just how difficult it had been for me to hang those lights. Watching all of this was my good friend who had come to spend a few days with us.

The next morning as I drove my friend to the airport, he spoke these words, “It seems like you are still struggling with a lack of patience and love toward your wife.” The observation stung me deeply, because he was so obviously right. This friend knows me better than almost anyone, and he wasn’t referring to just this one instance—he has seen me struggle in this area for years. Because of that, he was able to come alongside me to speak with gracious candor.

A wise pastor once said that in life you’ll have many fans and many foes, but few friends. French essayist Montaigne agrees, writing, “Those who venture to criticize us perform a remarkable act of friendship, for to undertake to wound and offend a man for his own good is to have a healthy love for him.”³ The willingness to engage in biblical candor for the sake of another’s spiritual good is one way in which biblical friendship is obviously and dramatically different from those worldly substitutes that typically ignore unpleasant subjects.

Carefulness. A third mark of biblical friendship is carefulness. If candor

³ William Deresiewicz, “Faux Friendship,” accessed May 26, 2016, <https://chronicle.com/article/Faux-Friendship/49308/>.

suggests we need to be courageous in speaking into a friend's life, carefulness urges wisdom and consideration in *how* to live out the life of friendship. A biblical friend is careful, not in an overtly timid or cautious sense, but in consideration and care.

Wise stewardship of a friend's trust is critical to the success of biblical friendship.

The authors of Proverbs help us understand we need to be careful friends in both our speech and timing. *What* we say (the content) should be influenced by *when* we say it (the circumstances). Proverbs 25:20 illustrates this well. “Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on soda.” Singing songs is often a good thing, but trying to spread joy to people who are currently grieving and hurting is worse than unhelpful; it’s insensitive and unkind. And we all know what happens when you combine vinegar and soda—a messy explosion.

Instead, biblical friends ensure their words are like “apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Prov 25:11) by matching the content of their speech and the timing to the immediate circumstances. And biblical friends also ensure that their level of knowledge about their friend informs what they say. When we know someone well, we are positioned to speak at a deeper level than when we know him or her only moderately well.

Can you see how each of these things integrate with and play off one another? The careful friend, wise about his timing, will know when and how to speak truth in love, and he will also know when his friend has had enough and needs time alone to process.

The biblical friend is also careful to steward the trust of friendship that has been granted to him. Solomon explains, “Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered” (Prov 11:13). Wise stewardship of a friend's trust is critical to the success of biblical friendship. A biblical friend seeks no pleasure in unnecessarily revealing his friend's weaknesses, trials, hurts, and disappointments. Casual divulgence of the inner workings of a friend's heart and life is never appropriate.

Counsel. Biblical friendship is marked by constancy, candor, carefulness and, finally, wise counsel.⁴ Don't let the word *counsel* scare you away. *Counseling* is simply speaking into a friend's life pointedly in order to offer care. Friendship provides the context for mutual encouragement, edification, and exhortation as friends help each other grow in godliness and grace. It is living out the "one-anothers" of Scripture together.

In a biblical friendship, counseling can and should thrive naturally. Kent Hughes writes, "The deepest of friendships have in common this desire to make the other person royalty. They work for and rejoice in the other's elevation and achievements."⁵ Too often our friendships lack this mark of godly counsel that seeks to build one another up. Indeed, biblical friendship is a mutual journey toward Christlikeness.

At this point, you may understandably be overwhelmed—for in any friendship, who among us can consistently offer true constancy, candor, carefulness, and counsel? The simple answer is: no one. But the fuller and more accurate answer is: no one *but* Jesus Christ. He is the perfect friend. All of these marks are perfectly fulfilled in him. In the ultimate act of friendship, he laid down his very life for us, so he could call us *friends*. This is why to call another *friend* is no small praise, but the very essence of the Christian faith. Gregory of Nazianzus put it best: "If anyone were to ask me, 'What is the best thing in life?' I would answer, 'Friends.'"⁶

These four characteristics of biblical friendship describe what a biblical friendship is and does. Let's now be sure we know what a biblical friendship is *not*.

What Biblical Friendship Is Not

Biblical friendship stands in stark contrast to the status quo. We are easily deceived into believing the promises our culture makes about friendship—promises that rich, warm, fulfilling relationships can follow quickly and easily as long as we both like the same things. There are three substitutes

⁴ For example, see Proverbs 15:22, 24:6, 27:9, 27:17.

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 62.

⁶ Michael Haykin, "With a Little Help from My Friends," accessed May 26, 2016, <https://9marks.org/article/little-help-my-friends/>.

we frequently take for the real thing: social media friendships, specialized friendships, and selfish friendships. Let's think about each one.

Biblical friendship is not a social media friendship. It was 3:35 a.m. and I had just woken up to the cries of my 11-month-old daughter, Emma. It is often hard for me to fall back to sleep once I get her back down, so I do what many other people do: I check all my social media accounts and email. By the time I read the blogs in my Feedly account, "heart" the adorable photos on Instagram, catch up with people on Facebook, watch the latest videos on Vine, and check out the latest news and quotes from Twitter, it is now 4:42 a.m! Where in the world did the last hour go? Why was I not sleeping?

God intends for our best friendships to flow
out of our relationship with Jesus Christ,
not primarily our social demographics.

For many of us, the influence of social media has created a new category of relationship that bears little resemblance to the biblical ideal. Email and Facebook and Twitter and all the rest, which promised to make relationships easier, often function as relational substitutes. The inherent promises of Facebook—that you can be connected to everyone, be friends with everyone—quickly leave their users disenchanted and even depressed.

Sherry Turkle writes,

In the silence of connection, people are comforted by being in touch with a lot of people—carefully kept at bay. We can't get enough of one another if we can use technology to keep one another at distances we can control: not too close, not too far, just right."⁷ This begins to get to the core of the problem we have in relationships: our sinful desire for control. We want friendships on our timetable, our terms of agreement. We do not want friendships that

⁷ Sherry Turkle, "The Flight From Conversation," accessed May 26, 2016, <http://www.ny-times.com/2012/04/22/opinion/sunday/the-flight-from-conversation.html?pagewanted=all>.

would move us out of our comfort zone. Digital connections “offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship.”⁸

I am not suggesting that you de-activate your Facebook account and abandon your Twitter. But I do hope that we will all pause and reflect on the role of social media in our lives and the actual value of what these sites and apps provide us.

Biblical friendship is not a specialized friendship. If the social media friendship is willing to sacrifice intimacy and vulnerability for the illusion of companionship, then the specialized friendship is content to reduce a relationship down to a common activity or interest.

As human beings, we have a high capacity to compartmentalize not only our lives, but also our friends. I typically see friendships break into one of two categories: the “stage-of-life” friendship or the “common interest” friendship.

In the “stage-of-life” friendship, you simply surround yourself with people who are at a similar point in life. College students with college students. Singles with singles. Young marrieds with other young marrieds. It is not wrong to develop friendships within these various contexts. However, if you pursue these kinds of friendships to the exclusion of other opportunities, you’re limiting the scope of what friendship can be. God intends for our best friendships to flow out of our relationship with Jesus Christ, not primarily our social demographics.

In the “common interest” specialized friendship, we section ourselves off according to a shared interest, hobby, or area of ministry. These are the common denominators of many friendships, and understandably so. Again, I am not saying these types of friendships are utterly false or useless. But as a rule they fall short of what God has to offer us in friendship and ought not to be confused with biblical friendship. After all, biblical friendship is ultimately grounded in the greatest and most wonderful common denominator of all, a shared faith in Jesus Christ.

I have to remind myself of this on a regular basis. I am not a sports fan (the only organized sport I ever played was T-ball in kindergarten), so there

⁸ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011), 1.

are *lots* of conversations between men in our church I can't contribute to. That particular area of bonding so common among guys isn't open to me. Yet I serve on a pastoral team with a dozen men who all enjoy sports, and our friendship never suffers just because I *don't* share that interest. Why? Because our friendship is not limited to or even based on sports—it is grounded on the bedrock of faith in Jesus Christ and his kingdom rule.

A healthy perspective on the true nature of biblical friendship allows people without common interests and who are in different stages of life to form deep and meaningful relationships.

Technology, social media, and common interests are helpful contexts and tools to help facilitate friendship, but friendship itself is always more than these.

Biblical friendship is not a selfish friendship. Finally, the selfish friendship seeks friendship purely for what can be gained for the all-important me. Of the three friendship substitutes, this is the most sinister.

I may try to befriend you because I believe that your friendship would give me status or raise my public profile. Maybe I want a friend who feeds my desires to be flattered and complimented. Whatever the reason, this kind of friendship is essentially a transaction: What can I give you in exchange for something I want? In an obsessively materialistic society like ours, these kinds of friendships form the backbone of nearly all business relationships. This conditions us to see them as normal and sets the stage for non-business relationships to emulate them. If a biblical friendship is essentially one that is Christ-centered, it's hard to imagine a worse counterfeit than a friendship that is self-centered.

Social media friendships, specialized friendships, selfish friendships—each one is like wax fruit in a bowl—a substitute for the real thing. Over time as we accept the substitute for the real thing, it eats away at the image of God in us and we lose aspects of our humanity. From the Christian perspective, we lose an opportunity to bear testimony to our Creator. We've taken a good thing—friendship built on social media or common interests—and hoped it would

provide for us the same level of satisfaction as true relationship and friendship.

In all of this, the Christian equipped with a biblically-shaped theology of friendship can use technology, social media, and common interests for what they are—not more than they are, and not less—and thus place them in their proper framework. Technology, social media, and common interests are helpful *contexts* and *tools* to help *facilitate* friendship, but friendship itself is always more than these.

Now that it is clear what biblical friendship is and what it is not, you might be wondering how you can pursue biblical friendships in your life. How can they become a reality in your current relationships? In the next section we will explore these questions.

How to Form Biblical Friendships

Earlier we discussed the four marks of biblical friendships—constancy, candor, carefulness, and counsel. We can all agree these are wonderful in theory. But how does one actually get there? I will suggest five ways.

Invest time. If we want biblical friendship, we must be willing to invest a resource that is limited and irreplaceable. We must invest our time. When it comes to setting the course of our own lives (to the extent we finite and fallen creatures can do this in a world with limited options), the most powerful tool available to us is the ability to say “Yes” to some things and “No” to others.

Embrace the right attitudes and goals. Investing time is not enough in itself. *How* and *why* we pursue biblical friendship is crucial. The right attitudes and goals are essential to forming and cultivating truly biblical friendships. To put it simply, biblical friendships are forged amidst a commitment to bring glory to God through this particular friendship.

The forging of biblical friendships requires a Christ-enabled commitment to love God and love one another, a commitment to pursue *Christ* and your friend’s highest welfare *in Christ*. As you seek to pursue biblical friendship, make these attitudes and goals explicit. This doesn’t mean every conversation in the context of a biblical friendship has to pivot tightly around God’s ongoing work of redemption in our lives and in the world. But if the open acknowledgment of these attitudes and goals is not a touchstone of your friendship, you may be straying away from the cultivation of

a genuinely biblical friendship.

Talk. Ours is a faith in which words are inescapably central. God reveals himself to us in Scripture through words. The gospel is communicated one person to another through words. We sing and pray to God using words. We encourage one another in the faith through words. So much of building biblical friendships comes down to conversation. In the end, therefore, if we want to *have* biblical friendships, we need to *be* people who relish the opportunity simply to talk.

Ask yourself: *Can I really expect to have a decent friendship of any kind—much less a biblical one—with someone I rarely talk to?* We need to live with a mindset that resists substituting technology for friendship, or chitchat for conversation. Because the truth is we cannot escape from the way God made us. If we want biblical friendship, there is simply no substitute for good old-fashioned conversation. A face-to-face interaction with my friend uniquely allows me to enter into his life, ask wise questions, explore secret areas of struggle, and laugh over life's ups and downs.

Share meals. Among all the shared activities that can help build biblical friendship through conversation, meals offer a special, yet often-neglected, opportunity. In *A Meal With Jesus*, Tim Chester comments, “Meals slow things down. Some of us don’t like that. We like to get things done. But meals force you to be people-oriented instead of task-oriented. Sharing a meal is not the only way to build relationships, but it is number one on the list.”⁹ A shared meal can create a special opportunity for thoughtful, face-to-face conversation.

Meals have provided my wife and me wonderful opportunities for forging friendships. As just one example, what began as my personal search for a spiritual mentor gradually developed into a wonderful tradition of us sharing Sunday-evening meals with an older couple. They have become genuine friends. Welcoming them into our home has enabled us to welcome them into our lives, and they have enriched our walks with Christ, both as individuals and as a couple. The simple practice of sharing meals together sets the stage for a beautiful biblical friendship.

⁹ Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, and Mission around the Table* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 47.

Confront with care. If we're serious about having a friendship that exists to increasingly glorify God, then, at times, our talk will have to venture into less comfortable territory. This is when the topic of our sanctification, that lifelong process of putting off sinful habits and practices and putting on greater Christlikeness, comes to the forefront. Sanctification involves those areas in our lives we would prefer not to talk about—areas of weakness and vulnerability and persistent sin patterns. Yet biblical friendship calls us to go where our sin nature fears to tread.

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opportunity simply to talk.

It helps to view the discomfort of these deeper conversations as sacrifices—something we wouldn't naturally want to do but are willing or even glad to do for the sake of another. Jesus' words in John 15:13 draw a perfectly clear connection between friendship and personal sacrifice: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." If self-sacrifice and service were the ultimate ways in which Jesus showed his friendship and love for us, then we must expect a measure of sacrifice to be essential—not optional—to the development of biblical friendships.

Here are some questions to gently confront, best asked thoughtfully and graciously.

How can I pray for you?

Where are you struggling?

Where have you experienced God's grace in your struggle?

Where has God been up to good in your life recently?

What is bringing joy to your heart?

And here are ways to invite a friend to speak honestly about what he or she sees in you:

Where do you see me growing spiritually?

How can I be a better friend to you?

Biblical friendship is forged through willing sacrifice, a desire to go beyond

a habit of happy talk and enter into a culture of caring confrontation.

This aspect of biblical friendship was mostly absent from my life until college. I remember one meeting I had with the resident director who oversaw my area of ministry. When he asked how I was doing, I replied how busy I was. That may seem like an innocent answer, but, for me, appealing to my schedule had become a blanket excuse that I imagined justified all the sinful habits I had developed—my distance, my impatience, my lack of love, my lack of consideration, and more. Sure, I was busy, and busy doing some good things, but I had allowed my busyness to build a wall between others and myself. I had become the classic isolated leader, someone so busy serving that he never seemed to have time to let anyone into his life. In replying, “I’m busy,” I thought I could avoid a deeper conversation...after all, we can’t let the meeting run over schedule, can we?

I’m sure my friend had seen this happen with zealous young men before, and even though it was likely to draw the conversation into uncomfortable territory, he knew me well enough to say exactly the right thing.

“Jonathan, maybe you’re *too* busy.”

Up until then, my “busy, busy” line had worked like a charm. People nodded their heads, in sympathy or empathy, and I walked away with a renewed rationalization for my wayward course. But somehow this simple sentence pulled me up short. The well-deserved sense of guilt that had been lingering in my conscience rose up, driving me in the direction of repentance. I began to see how easily I could get wrapped into my own agenda at the expense of other people. I had come to equate busyness with godliness, and to prefer doing things *for* people over being *with* people. That one sentence wasn’t the end of our conversation, but as the Spirit of God used my friend’s willingness to step out of the comfort zone, it was the perfect beginning.

In summary, it takes commitment to produce truly Christ-centered (and therefore biblical) friendships. With the help of the Spirit, we can make meaningful progress, and yield a fruitful relationship—a fragrant reminder of God’s grace in this life.

But we also need to be knowledgeable about what threatens these

precious relationships.

Threats to Biblical Friendship

As a rule, biblical friendship doesn't come easily, and any friendships we do form in this fallen world will face frequent and varied opposition. Jesus promised that following him was not going to be the easy way in this life. The best way? Yes. The most rewarding way, both now and especially hereafter? Absolutely. But the easiest way? No.

Therefore, it's vital to explore what threatens biblical friendship. We'll look at three threats:

- personal sin,
- the fear of being vulnerable about struggles,
- false expectations.

We need to be especially aware of and understand these potential pitfalls as we live out these friendships. Here they are in more detail.

Personal sin is a threat to biblical friendships. Proverbs identifies four ways we sin against our friends that can threaten the relationship: when we say hurtful things (essentially gossip and slander), when we use dishonest speech, when we are angry, and when we are jealous.

1. Hurtful speech.¹⁰ Gossip and slander undermine the very things essential to any relationship: trust, love, fidelity, and interpersonal rapport. When one friend speaks about another in a hurtful way, the results can be devastating. "A brother [or sister] offended is more unyielding than a strong city" (Prov 18:19a).

Though gossip and slander can (and should) be forgiven like any other sin, it can take considerable time for trust to be rebuilt, and the hard truth is that many friendships never recover fully. As Blaise Pascal writes, "I set this down as a fact, that if all men knew what each said of the other, there would not be four friends in the world."¹¹ Pascal's humor only highlights the reality that hurtful speech is a principal destroyer of friendship.

2. Dishonest speech.¹² Whereas gossip works behind the scenes in

¹⁰ See Proverbs 11:9a, 11:13, 16:28b.

¹¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. William F. Trotter (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 33.

¹² See Proverbs 16:28a, 24:28b, 26:28.

friendship, dishonest speech happens face to face. Most of us probably don't think we're dishonest with our friends in this way, but consider... Have you ever told a friend you will pray for him or her or offered some kind of practical assistance, and then not followed through or even followed up? How about declining or canceling an opportunity to get together by passing off a minor reason as the core reason? This is dishonesty and it is fertile soil for misunderstanding and offense.

Persistent jealousy and biblical friendship cannot coexist.

Another form of dishonest speech is flattery.¹³ This is the “positive” form of dishonesty. Not to be confused with encouragement, flattery drips praise but issues from an ill motive. It finds its roots in people-pleasing and fear of man. When I reject the Bible's counsel to speak truth in love, I will turn to flattery to try to maintain an appearance of friendship. Flattery is all form and no substance. According to Proverbs, when I make a show of genuine friendship through flattery, I may seem to be building up the other person, but all I'm doing is setting him up for disappointment, ruin, and entrapment.

3. Anger.¹⁴ In relationships, sinful anger often emerges from unmet expectations. If you don't give me something I want (e.g., respect, attention, honesty), I will be tempted to respond with anger. Perhaps you see a photo on Facebook of friends at a gathering and wonder why you were not invited. Instead of overlooking the issue or asking your friend, you allow the imagined offense to stew in your heart. Hang onto that offense, and it will inevitably affect your attitude toward the person or people involved. From there it will affect your speech and interactions. Your next meeting will be less warm and gracious, and tinged with doubt and suspicion. The friendship is now suffering because you have

¹³ See Proverbs 26:5, 28:23.

¹⁴ See Proverbs 15:18, 22:24–25.

made assumptions that may have no basis in reality.

The Bible is helpful and clarifying here, urging us to be *slow to anger* (James 1:19). When an unmet expectation tempts you to anger, ask God for the grace to not simply react. Instead, recognize it as an opportunity to overlook in love, or to believe the best about your friend(s), or to speak the truth in love, or to pray fervently for them. Or maybe all four.

4. Jealousy.¹⁵ Jealousy kicks in when we start to focus not on what God has called us to do or be, but on a perceived gap between others and ourselves. At that point, our attention has shifted from obeying God to idolizing what we think someone else possesses. This can be almost anything—physical or spiritual gifts, material possessions, attainments, relationships, etc.

In one of my first jobs, I worked with a man with a dynamic and charismatic personality. We developed a good working relationship and friendship, but after a few months I began to notice changes in my heart toward this man. He was funny, gregarious, outgoing, charming, and had a way of putting people at ease—all traits that are typically in short supply for me. I realized I was becoming jealous of his gifts and talents.

As we continued working together and our friendship grew, this nagging sense of jealousy grew alongside it, eventually eroding my focus on Christ. I was increasingly aware that my jealousy was keeping me from loving God wisely and pursuing him wholeheartedly. By the grace of God, I repented and, over time, was able to grow in thankfulness for the unique way God had equipped and blessed my friend *and* me.

Jealousy grows out of our belief that what someone else has or seems to have would make us happy. Once we start to focus on what is missing in our lives, jealousy tempts us to begin manipulating people and circumstances in order to get what we want. Clearly, persistent jealousy and biblical friendship cannot coexist.

The first threat to friendship is from our personal sin. The next threat comes from the fear of being open and honest.

The fear of being vulnerable is a threat to biblical friendships. Many of us are reluctant to be open and transparent in friendships because it

¹⁵ See Proverbs 6:34, 27:4.

makes us vulnerable to being hurt, misunderstood, or condemned. If we share how we struggle, then we risk being rejected. But the truth is, we all struggle. We all have parts of our character that are inferior and undesirable. And we will never have biblical friends unless we allow those inferior and undesirable parts of our character to become known to our closest friends. If you want to have biblical friendship, study the gospel until you realize we are all weak and needy. Then you will be willing to admit your own flaws to others, and you won't be shocked when you find out the extent to which weakness and neediness characterize even the greatest believers you know.

Through biblical friendship our shared lives can testify to the unity that comes from God himself.

False expectations are a threat to biblical friendships. In his humanity, Jesus had limitations on his time and “psychological bandwidth,” just like you and I do. Even the divine Son could only maintain a limited number of what we are calling biblical friendships. There were twelve with whom he spent most of his time, and just three with whom he was especially close. The reminder here for us is that biblical friendship takes place entirely within the context of finite human nature. So even though God can individually stretch us and our abilities, we all reach a limit on our capacity for such friendship. Being aware of this can prevent us from developing the false expectation that we should have a substantial number of close biblical friendships. That's not humanly possible.

We also shouldn't expect to develop a biblical friendship with a particular person just because we want to. Biblical friendships do not emerge from striving or grasping. Rather, they emerge from a gospel-motivated willingness to serve and love others and a trust that God will gradually guide us into biblical friendships as we follow his leading.

Having looked at a few threats to biblical friendship, remember that any relationship seeking to glorify God will come under attack. Instead of allowing the world, Satan, and our flesh to tear apart and break down our friendships, however, let's learn to walk in the grace of our Lord and Savior

Jesus Christ. Each day let us earnestly seek God's grace and mercy to walk in a manner worthy of the calling we have received, and then to show that grace and mercy to our friends.

Reunited: Joined Together by the Gospel

Biblical friendship is part of a larger story. You and I are participants in the most epic of all possible dramas, a story with an inconceivably vast and profound storyline. It begins in eternity past, rising up from the perfect union of the Trinity. Though our sin caused a rupture in our relationship with God and our relationships with each other, miraculously, both are being remade. As Christians we have been rewoven into the story line—and into God's pre-existing unity—through the redeeming and atoning work of Jesus Christ. The story will come to rest when we see with our eyes the glory the Father has given to Christ, a glory grounded in the eternal love and union between the Father, Son, and Spirit.

The end of that story lasts forever.

Today, Christians are in the middle of the story. In this time before the Lord's return, God is reuniting a people to himself and to one another, with biblical friendship playing an essential role. As we've seen, this is what biblical friendship is and does: it gives us a way of experiencing and living out the drama of all creation. Fallen people are becoming joined to one another as an expression of our shared union with God. In the eternity hereafter with Jesus, this union will be essential to our joyful, worshipful productivity. At the end of the story, we *will* be with Jesus where he is, and we will see the glory God has given to him.

You and I, my Christian friend, are part of this infinitely wonderful story. Let's live it out while we are here. Through biblical friendship our shared lives can testify—within the church and before a watching world—to the unity that comes from God himself.