

LIVE with Jesus in Community

Spiritual Friendship

INTRODUCTION

“Let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together.

Mother Teresa said loneliness is the great disease, the great poverty, of western society.

Loneliness is a deeply painful form of suffering. Human beings are made in the image of a relational God; we are designed to thrive only in loving relationships. This is why one of the worst punishments is solitary confinement and also why so many health problems are linked to loneliness.

Loving relationships not only heal the pain of loneliness, but they also create the joyful conditions inside us that foster growth. Character transformation begins in our right brain, which constantly scans our environment for signals about our connection to others. When we perceive that we belong, that our community is happy to see us, our brains light up with joy in the areas that prepare us to grow and change.

So friendship is necessary for thriving and for helping us become more like Jesus.

Jesus made us this way. We see His commitment to friendship in the way He lived His life and in His vision for His church.

Jesus’ Lifestyle of Spiritual Friendship

In the gospels we see Jesus living a lifestyle of friendship. He does not marry, but He has friends.

When He calls His disciples to follow Him, He invites them into a *community of friends*. He looks at them with friendship in His eyes; He asks them to be *His* friends; and He commands them to be friends to one another:

- “I have called you friends,” (John 15:15).
- “You are my friends if you do what I command,” (John 15:14).
- “Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends,” (John 15:12-13).

Not only were the disciples Jesus' friends, He had a closer group of friends within that group—Peter, James, and John. And He had other “friends”—Lazarus, Mary, and Martha (John 11:11). He also made it clear that these friendships were His true family connections, trumping His biological family: “‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers,’” (Matt 12:48-9).

Jesus' Vision for His Church

Jesus' vision for His church is a vision of perfect oneness through friendship in His body.

He prays for us, saying, “The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one,” (John 17:22-23).

So if I am in Jesus and you are in Jesus, we are in Him *together*; we are ONE. We are eternally united to Him and to one another through His Spirit.

That's why it makes sense that He says, “That my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you,” John 15:12.

Jesus sees us as His body, loving one another as He is loving us. This is Spiritual Friendship (Spirit-full Friendship).

If we are His body, love is like the lifeblood of that body. As we love one another, the life of Jesus who “holds all things together” and who is the “head of the church” flows through us—giving life to each part and making the whole body vital and strong.

We are to become a joyful circle of resilience—a network of stubbornly loyal, love-drenched, life-sustaining friendships—of friendships so deep that as friends in His church we will wash one another's feet and lay down our lives for one another—living out with and to one another the love of Christ who holds us together and welcoming all who would join us into our love.

Do you have friends like this? Are you this kind of friend?

THE PRACTICE

The following questions are meant to prompt your consideration of friendship in your life. In a posture of prayer, conversing with the Lord, consider these questions. Come back to them every so often, inviting the Lord to help you examine your practice of spirit-full friendship.

Obstacles to Friendship:

Individualism

Our culture is toxically individualistic. It programs us to avoid accountability and commitments that interfere with our perceived freedoms.

- How do you see individualism working against the time and commitment that friendships require in your life?
- Do you find you back away from friends who “speak the truth in love” with you? Do you know why this is the case?

Idealism

We miss out on friendship sometimes because we are waiting for a better sort of friend. But in the body of Christ, we are called to love as friends those the Lord has near us.

- Are there friendships in your life you have let “cool” because you found something not to your liking in your friend? Are there people in your life whom you have kept at arm’s length because you are waiting for a different kind of friend?
- How might you more intentionally give and receive the gift of friendship with those who are in your life right now?

Intimidation¹

True friendship requires vulnerability. Many of us find this intimidating. We believe the lie that if people really knew us, they would reject us, so we avoid getting too close to one another.

- How do you see intimidation interfering with your pursuit of friendship?
- Is there someone you sense the Lord prompting you to risk reaching out to?

Practices of Spirit-full Friendship:

Seeing the Glory-Self in Your Friends

Each person in the body of Christ has a self-united-with-Christ that will shine with the glory of God for eternity. Jesus says He has given to us the glory the Father gave Him! (John 17:22).

C.S. Lewis takes up this theme, saying, “It is a serious thing . . . to remember that the dullest most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now,

¹ Individualism, Idealism, Intimidation. These concepts come from a sermon by John Mark Comer: “Jesus’ Call to Community” found at practicingtheway.org.

you would be strongly tempted to worship,” *The Weight of Glory*. Loving our friends involves training our eyes to see the image of God in each one and then affirming what we see.

- Ask the Lord to show you His glory in your friends. Thank Him for what you see. When the time is right, tell your friend the good you see in him or her.

Forgiving One Another and Working through Conflict

Our culture “cancels” and “ghosts” those who disagree with us or hurt us. But God’s word says, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you,” Ephesians 4:32. He calls us to “bear with one another and forgive one another,” (Colossians 3:13) because “love bears all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7).

- Do you have a relationship suffering from unresolved conflict? Is there something you can ask forgiveness for? Is the Lord asking you to extend forgiveness?

Stubborn Loyalty²

In our age of disposable relationships, Jesus calls us to stubborn loyalty: “A friend loves at all times,” (Proverbs 17:17); “Be devoted to one another in love,” (Romans 12:10).

- Is there someone who needs to know you remain loyal to them? How might the Lord be leading you to demonstrate or renew loyalty?
- Is there a small group of friends with whom you can commit to meeting regularly?

Listening

We live in a noisy culture where many voices speak but few listen. James says, “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen and slow to speak,” (James 1:19). Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it like this: “The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them,” *Life Together*.

- When you are with friends, do you tend to speak more or listen more?
- Who in your circle of friends might need someone to listen to him or her this week?

Helpfulness

We all have burdens—physical sickness or weakness, a struggle at work or in a relationship, mental and emotional difficulties. To follow Jesus in showing friendship to one another, He calls

² Stubborn Loyalty. This concept comes from a sermon by Jon Tyson: “A Creative Minority.”

us to “serve one another humbly in love,” (Galatians 5:13) by “bearing one another’s burdens,” (Galatians 6:2)

Bonhoeffer says, “We must allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. God will be constantly crossing our paths and canceling our plans by sending us people with claims and petitions. . . we must not spare our hand where it can perform a service” *Life Together*.

- Is there someone in your life who would be blessed by an act of helpfulness from you?

Encouragement

We are called to “encourage one another and build one another up,” (Hebrews 3:13).

- Who could use your encouragement? What good do you see in them? What promise of the Lord might lift their spirits?

Confession

James says, “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed,” James 5:16.

Our friendships go to the deepest level when we can compassionately listen to our friends’ struggle with sin and humbly share our own sins. Until then, “He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone,” *Life Together*.

- Do you have a friend you can confess to?
- Are you the kind of friend a person will feel safe confessing to?
- Start small by trying to answer this question, “What is one way I failed to love God or someone else this week?”
- Pray for one another, remembering the Lord’s mercy and forgiveness.

Conclusion

Jesus said, “Everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another,” (John 13:35). Jesus calls us to the practice of loving our friends in Him with an affirming, forgiving, loyal, listening, helpful, encouraging, humble, and safe love.

INTERESTING QUOTES

“The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty — it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality.” – Mother Teresa

“To the Ancients, Friendship seemed the happiest and most fully human of all loves, the crown of life and the school of virtue. The modern world, in comparison, ignores it,” C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*

“A friend is someone who know the song in your heart and can sing it back to you when you have forgotten the words,” *Anonymous*.

HELPFUL VERSES

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all, who is over all and through all and in all,” Ephesians 4.

“Be devoted to one another in love,” Romans 12:10.

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another,” John 13:34.

“Encourage one another,” 1 Thessalonians 4:18.

“Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters,” Hebrews 13:1.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Before you try this practice:

1. Would you say that you have good friends in this season of your life?
2. How is your small group a part of your circle of friendship?
3. Would you say that you know how to be a good a friend to others?
4. Do you have time in your life for deeper friendships?
5. How do you experience a desire for closer friendships?

After you have tried this practice:

1. Talk about your experiences with this practice.
2. Which questions about friendship did you find most helpful?
3. Was any part of this practice challenging?
4. How do you think you will engage with this practice going forward?
5. Are there some ways your small group would be comfortable being more intentional about friendship with one another?