

PURPOSE-FILLED FRIENDSHIP

EXPLORING THE GOSPEL'S EFFECT ON FRIENDSHIP ITSELF AND WHAT IT TRULY  
MEANS TO BE A FRIEND

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## ABSTRACT

God said in the garden of Eden that it is not good for man to be alone. He gave us the gift of human relationships so that we could encourage each other, guide each other, and show love to each other. This thesis seeks to explore the purpose of one of these relationships— friendship. Friendship is deeply needed and sought after in our sinful world and must overcome many barriers in a world that encourages independence. This thesis explores the biblical ideals for friendship for which the gospel uniquely qualifies us, and shows the way our perfect friend Jesus embodies Christian friendship in his three-fold office of prophet, priest, and king.

## A FRIENDSHIP THAT INSPIRES

Friendship is a tricky thing. It is tricky to define, it is tricky to establish, and it is tricky to maintain. Its value is questioned, its apparent biblical treatment is light, and by its exclusive nature it seems to stand contrary to the biblical command to love our neighbors and our enemies without differentiation. It can seem that since there is so much that stands in the way of friendship, there is no purpose that makes pursuing friendship worthwhile. What is the purpose of friendship, then? The account of the friendship between David and Jonathan recorded in 1 Samuel 23:13-18 shows this.

The account shows two men who love each other and who see faith in the LORD in each other. It shows a relationship which was born in the face of adversity and for the sake of overcoming adversity. David was on the run from Saul, the King of Israel. Saul knew that David had been chosen by God and anointed by Samuel to take his place as king. Out of jealousy, he was bent on taking David out of the picture. After a few encounters in and around the palace in which Saul tried to take David's life, David began to run.

David was constantly on the move. The narrator of the section lets us know that David was moving from stronghold to stronghold in Israel and not finding any safety (1 Sam 23:14 NIV). He finally fled even further away from Israel, the land he should rightly have been governing, and he went to find safety in the enemy-controlled hills and deserts of Ziph. Day after day, Saul searched for David with all of the resources that were at his fingertips as king. Imagine for a moment the psychological terror that David must have been experiencing: wondering every

night whether he would wake up with Saul's spear at his throat, constantly scanning the horizon to see if Saul's army was bearing down on him.

It was when David was in the depths of this psychologically beaten down state that Jonathan came to his friend, David. The narrator announces to us that this is Saul's son Jonathan (1 Sam 23:17). By announcing this otherwise obvious fact, the narrator is emphasizing to us that Jonathan was not doing the easy thing, or even the loyal thing by going out to David. He chose to go against his father and king, and he chose to do what was dangerous and what was difficult. He left behind family and the promise of power in order to strengthen a hurting friend whom he loved.

Saul pursued David day after day and could never find him. Yet Jonathan was able to find him almost immediately. The implication of this could not be much clearer. Saul could not find David for the love of God. God was protecting David and making it impossible for Saul to find him. This same love of God is exactly why Jonathan did find David. Jonathan's friendship was a gift from God to David for his time of need.

When Jonathan met David in the wilderness, all he said to his friend, David, was this: "Don't be afraid," he said. "My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this" (1 Sam 17:23). Jonathan could have come to David with all the secrets and plans of his father Saul, but instead he brought something much more valuable. He brought the promise and comfort of God.

Jonathan could not have said this if he didn't believe it. He had faith that every word that had been promised to his friend David would come true. For this reason he went out to David in the physical and spiritual desert in order to comfort him with the faithfulness of God. This faith is what made them friends. They both believed in the friendship of God.

This is a beautiful example of friendship. It is an illustration of someone choosing to support someone else when they probably should not have, and it is an example of one pursuing the other even when they know it may well cost them and perhaps even cause them to suffer.

There are three elements in this account to which I would like to draw specific attention. First, the fact that David ran from stronghold to stronghold is significant. David could not find a safe place anywhere. We, as Christians and as human beings in general, find ourselves often in a similarly desperate situation. Although we are not pursued as David was, we do find ourselves running metaphorically from place to place always looking for safety, but never finding it. We are in critical need of one loyal, unchanging, solid thing in our lives. We are in dire need of friendship.

Next, this account shows us that the gift of true friendship which David and Jonathan shared together is a gift from God which is brought to its peak only on the basis of faith. In twenty-first century culture, finding a friendship relationship comparable to that of Jonathan and David's is almost impossible. Our cultures both outside and even inside our churches put up obstacles that block the way to creating and maintaining true and meaningful friendships. A friendship built on faith has God's power and purpose behind it to overcome these obstacles.

Finally, this account shows us what true friendship looks like. Theirs was a friendship in which the biblical values of faithfulness, empathy, honesty, and counsel were presented in an ideal form.

We, as Christians, need friendship like this. Humanity needs friendship like this. We need someone who, driven by their empathetic love for the us, will faithfully chase us down into the wilderness of our lives to give us the honest and godly counsel that everything is going to work out for our good, knowing that by faith it will. We need someone who is going to do more for us

than just spend time with us. In the end, we need a friend where all others fail. We need friendship with God, and we have it— a friendship with one who pursues us into our spiritual desert, who creates friendship with him through faith; a friendship with one who was faithful to the point of death and resurrection, whose empathy brought him to earth to live perfectly for us, whose honesty convicts us and also brings us comfort, and whose counsel guides us towards an eternal friendship with him. It is on the basis of this friendship that we may be faithful and valuable friends to others in our lives. It is our friendship with God that gives true meaning and purpose to our earthly friendships.

This essay seeks to explore the purpose of biblical friendship over the course of three parts. Initially, I argue that loneliness and the lack of friendship can have a detrimental effect on a person's physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. I will also briefly summarize the endless train of barriers that stand in the way of true friendship. The emphasis will focus on features of modern Western culture: how the current movements of individualism, consumerism, and technology affect the way we carry out our friendship relationships.

In the second section of the essay, I will undertake the task of characterizing friendship. I will first summarize the ways in which philosophers and psychologists, both religious and not, have characterized it. Then I will show that because of our friendship with Christ, earthly friendship can be understood both broadly and narrowly. Broadly, friendship is the relationship that all believers have with each other on the basis of faith. Narrowly, friendship is indeed a much tighter relationship in which Christians may offer their specific gifts to each other in an intimate way. In this section, I also propose four biblical ideals which the entire body of Christ may strive to show to each other in both the broad and narrow sense of Christian friendship.



Finally, I will demonstrate the functions and purposes of Christian friendship. Just as each person has been lovingly created by God with unique, Spirit-given gifts, each friendship has been created and given by God to be as unique as the people who participate in it. This diversity is what makes friendship difficult to describe. However, we all are able to identify a friendship when we see it. I will use the narrative matrix of Jesus as our prophet, priest, and king, our truest friend, to show what true friendship looks like and how each of us are uniquely blessed to carry out God's purpose in friendship.

This helps us in answering the one question proposed at the outset of this essay: What is the purpose of Christian friendship? The Gospel gives us the commonality that provides the basis of every Christian friendship. It sets Christian friendship apart from any other relationship. The Gospel changes friendship so that it is not based around the pursuit of human commonality, but rather around the praise of the humiliated and exalted Christ. And so, we have all been charged by the gospel with the responsibility and privilege to be faithful, empathetic, honest, and counseling friends to all both in and out of the body of Christ. The gospel also enhances friendship as it enables us to realize the spiritual gifts that the Holy Spirit has given us and motivates us to offer these gifts to our close friends in an intimate relationship. The purpose of Christian friendship is to pursue others without and within the body of Christ, with the goal of strengthening them in the Word of God.

## THE STATE OF MODERN FRIENDSHIP

### **The Need for Friendship**

Imagine looking out of the window of a high-rise apartment building. You look out and you see a city lighting up the night. You see the lights from the squares of other windows, but instead of feeling warm and welcoming, the windowpanes remind you of the bars on a prison cell. You look down, and you see thousands of people below you walking quickly, attending to their own lives. You can see them, but they do not see you.

Imagine sitting in a retirement community surrounded by people, yet you sit nowhere near anyone who truly cares for you. Imagine sitting at home caring for your newborn child, your own flesh and blood, and yet feeling like you have no one you can talk to. Imagine scrolling through Facebook or Instagram, browsing through the happy faces of the people who are your “friends,” and feeling as if none of those several hundred people really know you at all. Imagine sitting down in a Christian church, watching as the members greet each other as if they were family— checking in on each other’s well-being, laughing at jokes, and yet no one takes the time to do more than smile at you.

God created people to be relational (Gen 2:18), and yet in a world of nearly 8 billion people, friendships can be difficult to find and hold on to. Why is that? Everyone’s story is different.

Think for a moment about the friendships that you have had in your life. Perhaps as a young child you had friends at school who would invite you over to play, or for sleepovers, or with whom you would get into trouble. As you grew, those friendships changed. As you entered high school and dove into new interests in a new place, the nature of your old friendships was altered, or you made new friendships altogether. As you continued to grow in maturity and

responsibility perhaps during college years, again your friendship relationships were forced to change and to fit into the new type of life you were living. In adult life as you dove into the real world and as you began to understand what it takes to succeed in it, your friendships were again probably forced to change, and this time maybe even to take a backseat to all the pressing matters of life. The friendships that used to mean everything to you may now seem a luxury to be enjoyed only if time allows. If any friendship relationship has weathered the tests and changes of the growing years, that friendship is incredibly rare. Yet friendship is needed in every stage of life, especially in adult life.

### **The Loneliness Epidemic**

Former United States Surgeon General Vivek Murthy made this statement concerning loneliness in America:

The most common ailment I saw as a doctor was not heart disease or diabetes, it was loneliness. Loneliness that was driven by a lack of connection, a lack of meaning, and a lack of self-worth. As I visited big cities and small towns across our country as Surgeon General, I found that many people were in pain that stemmed from many sources, including chronic illness, violence, addiction, and economic hardship. And even though they knew others were experiencing similar pain, they felt profoundly alone. This was true across socioeconomic classes, geographies, and ages. There was also a stigma around loneliness that made people ashamed to admit they were lonely. They felt it made them seem deficient and unworthy of love.<sup>1</sup>

Why does friendship matter? Friendship matters because it is an antidote to the loneliness which has reached epidemic levels in America. Loneliness affects our spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being, although it must be noted that friendship is not the only antidote to loneliness.

1. Dan Shawbel, "Vivek Murthy: How to Solve the Work Loneliness Epidemic, *Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danschawbel/2017/10/07/vivek-murthy-how-to-solve-the-work-loneliness-epidemic-at-work/#7069789d7172>.

To illustrate this point, a 2018 study conducted by the Cigna health service company found that approximately 1 in 6 adults in the United States suffers from a mental health condition,<sup>2</sup> that over half of Americans feel that no one truly knows them well, that just under half of the population sometimes or always feel alone or left out, and that nearly 40% of Americans feel that they have no one they can turn to. In the end, the writers of the study were able to feel comfortable saying that most Americans are lonely.<sup>3</sup> The Cigna study also outlined the health risks that loneliness increases. The study likens the health effects of loneliness to smoking 15 cigarettes every day, making it more dangerous to health than the currently acknowledged epidemic of obesity in the United States.

John Cacioppo, a psychologist at the University of Chicago, dedicated his entire academic career to finding connections between loneliness and adverse health effects— even proposing a new field of medical study called social neuroscience which is the study of the underlying biological issues that affect a person’s social structures.<sup>4</sup> His studies were able to connect loneliness to problems not only psychological but also physiological including cardiovascular and immune function, poor sleep, and increased stress.<sup>5</sup>

Men particularly have weak friendships. Stephen Mansfield is the author of a New York Times best-selling book on the topic of twenty-first century masculinity. He has this to say both positively and negatively concerning the value and state of male friendships: “I learned a long

2. U.S. Loneliness Index Report, Cigna, 2018, [https://www.multivu.com/players/English/8294451-cigna-us-loneliness-survey/docs/IndexReport\\_1524069371598-173525450.pdf](https://www.multivu.com/players/English/8294451-cigna-us-loneliness-survey/docs/IndexReport_1524069371598-173525450.pdf).

3. The study notes that when examining mental health issues, loneliness is a consistent part of many of the presenting pathologies.

4. Cacioppo, John. “Social Neuroscience: Understanding the Pieces Fosters Understanding the Whole and Vice Versa.” *American Psychologist*, 57, no. 11 (2002): DOI: 10.1037//0003-066X.57.11.817.

5. Denworth, Lydia. “Why You Need a Social Convoy.” *Psychology Today*. Sussex Publishers. Accessed December 9, 2019. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/brain-waves/201806/why-you-need-social-convoy>.

time ago in my consulting work that friends are the best reflection of a man's happiness, priorities, and health. What I usually hear from them is that they have simply lost touch with the men who mean the most to them. They find themselves awash in a sea of casual relationships.”<sup>6</sup> He goes on to quote a common jab aimed at middle aged men: “By his early thirties the average man cannot name a friend close enough to even know what is going on in his life, much less to call us at the last minute for a bit of fun.”<sup>7</sup> It is clear that a lack of real friendship is something that is common to many.

On the positive side, much study has been done into the emotional benefits of friendship. It has been found that people who are more positively engaged in a social life are more likely to age successfully<sup>8</sup>, are more likely to meet their fitness and wellness goals,<sup>9</sup> and are more likely to be happy merely from the fact that they are surrounded by a supportive group of generally happy people.<sup>10</sup> Further, in a study completed in 2010 by Julianne Holt-Lunstad and Timothy B. Smith, it was found after considering the lives of over 300,000 people that there is a 50% increased likelihood of greater longevity for those who have strong social relationships.<sup>11</sup> Friendship is

6. Stephen Mansfield, *Mansfield's Book of Manly Men: An Utterly Invigorating Guide to Being Your Most Masculine Self* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2013), 73.

7. Mansfield, *Mansfield's Book of Manly Men*, 74.

8. Natalie Sanders, “How to Age Successfully.” University of Utah Health. Accessed December 9, 2019. [https://healthcare.utah.edu/the-scope/shows.php?shows=0\\_iyne0p9e](https://healthcare.utah.edu/the-scope/shows.php?shows=0_iyne0p9e).

9. Oishi, Shigehiro. "The Psychology of Residential Mobility: Implications for the Self, Social Relationships, and Well-Being." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5, no. 1 (2010): 5-21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41613306>.

10. Fowler James H, Christakis Nicholas A. Dynamic spread of happiness in a large social network: longitudinal analysis over 20 years in the Framingham Heart Study *BMJ* 2008; 337 :a2338.

11. Holt-Lunstad, Julianne, Timothy B. Smith, and J. Bradley Layton. "Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review." *PLoS medicine* 7, no. 7 (2010): e1000316.

healthy. It has been proven empirically that friendship has the power to change people for the better. Yet, it is a fact that there is an astounding lack of friendship in America.

### **The Decline of Friendship**

There are myriad reasons why friendship seems at an all-time low. Barriers like technology have the power to bring us closer together, yet in the end make relational intimacy harder to achieve. Add to that the cultural assumption that all intimate same-sex friendships must necessarily be homosexual ones. Also troubling is the notion that if a person would be truly independent they cannot be dependent on anyone which collides with the fact that life events such as marriage or a cross-country move often sever the longest friendships, and true friendship for many is impossible to find.

### **The Barrier of Mobility**

One barrier presented by Western culture is the increased mobility of our country. Nearly everything we do both socially and non-socially is done outside of our neighborhoods. Speaking only from my own experience, my neighbors are friendly but are not open to being friends, because home is seen as a haven from social interaction. Anything done socially must now be done away from home. This reversal of neighborhood culture is only a few years old. Short term, then, mobility causes us to lose out on the friendships our proximity could have gained us. In the long term as well, people are increasingly less likely to put down permanent roots in a place or in a circle of people. Without notice, most people will pick up everything and make a move across the country to start fresh and will make a clean break from the relationships they had created

whether weak or strong. This has had a psychological effect. Shigehiro Oishi of the University of Virginia has done research that reveals three things:

First, residential mobility is associated with the primacy of the personal self over the collective self. Second, it is associated with duty-free friendships and group memberships rather than duty-based friendships and group memberships. Third, it is also associated with personal forms of subjective well-being (based on self-esteem, the verification of the personal self). Finally, residential mobility is associated with lower levels of well-being and, most dramatically, a higher mortality risk, especially for introverts.<sup>12</sup>

Oishi's research shows that because people are able to so freely move in and out of their neighborhoods and the people groups in them, they increasingly tend to have a more selfish attitude when it comes to who they willingly associate with. This study would say that mobility is a double-edged sword. While it does offer us much in terms of economic gain and freedom, it does create in us a kind of selfishness which leads to a utilitarian view of friendship.

Although there are many negative aspects of technology when it comes to developing meaningful relationships, it must be noted that technology certainly can serve relationships in a beautiful way, both in developing new relationships and also in maintaining old ones. With the advent of social media, however, we thought that technology would help us remove the mobility barrier, but in truth it has had the effect of hindering social development.<sup>13</sup> Online, a person is able to project any version of themselves that they wish to project, even an untruthful one. Usually, this projection does not tell the whole truth. If intimacy is to be developed in truth, then technology is not the answer.<sup>14</sup>

12. Oishi, Shigehiro. "The Psychology of Residential Mobility: Implications for the Self, Social Relationships, and Well-Being." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5, no. 1 (2010): 5-21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41613306>.

13. Griffiths, Mark. "Friendship and social development in children and adolescents: The impact of electronic technology." *Educational and Child psychology* 14 (1997): 25-37.

14. Reflecting on personal experience, I have always found that relationships are seemingly easy to maintain over text message or social media to the level that I at least knows what is going on in their lives. However, when I meet face to face with someone I have mainly only communicated with using technology, the relationship is

### **The Barrier of Individualism**

Another barrier to real friendship is the individualism of our culture. The language of individual rights, personal choice, and privacy is around us in movies, TV shows, and every type of media. In general, individualism is meant to encourage independence and a thriving unique spirit. While the ability to function, make decisions, and take responsibility is valuable, when we work as hard as we do to cut off our interdependencies, we can wind up suffering loneliness and moving backwards into isolation. <sup>15, 16</sup>

According to Paul Wadell, individualism also causes us to miss out on one of the basic human experiences. He writes: “This indeed is the heart of friendship. An undying need of every human being is the need to communicate our self, to share our soul and spirit with others in the hope that we might live in communion with them.”<sup>17</sup> As humans, we have an innate desire to share who we are with the people around us. When we are denied this opportunity, we miss out on a fundamental part of what it means to be human.

usually not as strong as it would have been face to face. It is surface level at best. With this I do not mean to say that technology is useless in maintaining relationships, only that it is not a replacement for speaking face to face.

15. This is not always the case. A study done in the Netherlands exploring both individualistic countries and collectivistic countries revealed that loneliness was lower in the collectivistic countries. Other studies have been done since, though that have revealed this study to have had a rather broad strokes approach which may have swayed the results to a certain extent.

16. A vein that could fruitfully be explored would be to consider how intersectional understandings of identities create a barrier and reinforce individualism. With a renewed postmodern focus on external identity, we are encouraged to spend time with people like us. We have so narrowed the categories, though, that there may be no one who is like us at all! This would cause us to be afraid to join with those who are different because we are worried about rejection based on superficialities.

17. Paul J. Wadell, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2004), 46.



## Emotional Barriers

There are also two barriers to friendship that the general character traits of 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans present.<sup>18</sup> First is overdetachment. This is, in part, the result of individualism. A person who is overdetached values independence to such a high level that they have much trouble growing close to anyone.<sup>19</sup> When someone grows close to them, they feel the need to pull back from the intimacy. Outwardly, they are all charm, but inwardly they are masters of evasiveness. Overdetachment is not always something that is enacted willfully; mostly it is done subconsciously.

Conversely, overattachment is also a barrier to friendship. An overly attached person is so driven by the need for intimacy that they likely suffocate the person they long to grow close to.<sup>20</sup> Again, driving the friend away is not always willful, but is done by accident, making the wound all the more painful.

Wesley Hill outlines other barriers to friendship in his book, *Spiritual Friendship*. First, he sees in western culture a tendency to believe that all same sex friendships by nature must have some aspect of homosexuality in them, no matter how small that part may be.<sup>21</sup>

18. These, of course, are not traits that are confined to the twenty-first century. But they certainly are present.

19. Paul J. Waddel, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2004), 48.

20. Paul J. Waddel, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2004), 51.

21 Hill cites a study conducted by Niobe Way, Professor of Applied Psychology at New York University, called *Deep Secrets: Boys' Friendships and the Crisis of Connection*. In her study it was found that in their early years, most boys from early on and into their teenage years have intensely close relationships. They share secrets, they discuss their feelings, and even declare that without their friends they would be a completely different person. As they grow, though, these friendships quickly deteriorate as they feel the pressure to "man up." Way would say that boys today experience a crisis of connection because they live in a culture in which relational needs are usually assigned to women, or to gay men.

Hill also sees the myth of the ultimate significance of the nuclear family as a significant barrier to friendship.<sup>22</sup> He would say that the importance of dedicating yourself to those in your nuclear family has been emphasized so extensively that there is no longer any emotional space for carrying out other relationships. This may seem like a controversial statement, but it certainly does ring true. It may not seem as such, but a person's wedding day is often both the beginning of a new marital relationship, and also the end of an intimate friendship. The best man or maid of honor puts on a brave face but may be hurting inside. This truth also may be seen at the birth of a baby. When a child is born, often the first thought in a friend's mind is not "congratulations," but rather "it was nice knowing you." Nights that otherwise would have been spent playing board games late into the night are cut short by a baby's bedtime, and spontaneous lunches together are cut out of the equation by naptime. When a new responsibility, privilege, and love (such as marriage or a child) comes into a person's life, often friendship is left behind.

This paper could describe in many more pages the specific barriers to friendship whether imposed by culture, by character flaws, or by sinful nature.<sup>23</sup> Suffice it to say that these barriers can seem insurmountable and that true friendship can feel like something that is unattainable. In the end, the truth is that the source of these barriers is our own sinful natures. Friendship is and always will be counter-cultural and against the egocentrism of our corrupted hearts. Without something to break us out from our selfishness, we will never be free to go out from ourselves to serve one another in friendship. The world needs friendship, and it needs Christ in order for friendship to serve its best purpose.

22. Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015), 11-13.

23. As culture changes, so the way that we carry them out changes. Even if an entire book were dedicated to this topic, it would be out of date within 10 years and a whole new set of barriers will have arisen.

## **Barrier to Barrier, Stronghold to Stronghold**

It has been shown that loneliness and its effects are at epidemic levels. People are suffering because of a lack of relationships, and yet it has also been shown that we, as a culture continue to feel the need advance ourselves past them. The ideals of America are success, wealth, and leisure. Only once these are achieved can a person have the luxury of pursuing real relationships, including friendship. These ideals can illustrate the strongholds that David continually fled to in the account from 1 Samuel 23. A person may run to the stronghold of success, and when they inevitably find the truth that this stronghold is not as strong as he thought, he runs to the stronghold of wealth, and onward to leisure, and from there to any number of things. All of these are barriers to the relationships that God has gifted to humankind so that we can find true safety and security in him and through him, in each other.

## **CHARACTERIZING FRIENDSHIP**

### **Friendship as a Type of Love**

Perhaps every person reading this essay has sat in a church on a Sunday morning listening to the pastor preaching on love. As he preaches, he brings up two Greek words for love: *agape* and *eros*. He brings up these two words to highlight the kinds of love that exist in the world.

Understood positively, *eros* is romantic love as exemplified between a husband and a wife, and *agape* is the unconditional love with which God loves us and which motivated him to send his Son to die on the cross.

This is an effective strategy to show people how our love often falls short and becomes selfish and only self-edifying, while God's love is unconditional and is not based on anything that we do, but only on the true love that is part of God's essence. However, this illustration sells

the broad concept of love woefully short. There are so many aspects of the love of God that may be illustrated if we broaden our definition for love. For example, if we were to talk more freely about the friendship of our God, we might be able to illustrate the kind of love that is currently shown to us, how Jesus as our truest friend functions daily for us in the throne room of God interceding for us, praying for us, guiding us, and giving us counsel through his Word. Perhaps we do not speak the language of friendship because we do not understand it completely. This section of the essay will seek to characterize friendship more clearly.

### **Historical and Philosophical Characterizations**

To understand friendship, it is helpful to understand its history. In ancient Greece, friendship was fiercely sought out as a necessary virtue for a good life.<sup>24</sup> The Greek philosophers were the first to famously make an attempt to define friendship. In Plato's *Lysis*, friendship is the main topic addressed, and yet although many hypotheses about the nature of friendship are discussed, they are all rejected in the end by the characters who debate them.<sup>25,26</sup>

24. Mullis, Eric C. "Confucius and Aristotle on the Goods of Friendship." *Dao* 9, no. 4 (2010): 391–405. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-010-9185-y>, 394.

25. A.W. Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), 1.

26. It is not necessarily that a philosophically "good" friendship is impossible to find and maintain. It is that most friendships are instrumental in nature. We only seek them out for our own good. Plato's reasoning is that if there were a friendship based around pursuing a common value, then those involved in the friendship would no longer love the thing that have in common because it would not be useful to them anymore. Therefore, since there is no "highest good" toward which friendship pursues, friendship easily falls into chaos. This is philosophically sound logic, yet it leads the Christian to think: what other conclusion might Socrates have come to if he had known what the highest good really is?

Plato's student Aristotle went further in defining friendship and gives insight into why friendship was such a sought-after relationship. He said that there are three kinds of friendship. The first is the friendship of utility in which the two people involved are not in the relationship because of any affection, but because each one receives a benefit. The second is the friendship of pleasure in which the two people involved are in the relationship because of affection. It is the far more emotional friendship, yet because of its emotional nature it is the most short-lived. The third is the relationship of the good in which the two people stick together because of mutual appreciation for the virtues that the other person holds dear.<sup>27</sup>

This final friendship is the one that many Greeks saw as worth having.<sup>28</sup> In the ancient Greek culture in which the highest good was the ultimate goal rather than standing, wealth, or power, the friendship of the good was seen as a sought-after treasure.<sup>29</sup>

Beginning to move forward in the history of friendship, the early church often downplayed the value of such friendship as the Greeks displayed because it was tied so closely to their pagan ideals.<sup>30</sup> Generally speaking, the church "met the new, idolized friendship head-on and grudgingly acknowledged the need to defend marriage and the family."<sup>31</sup> However, it must be said that in the earliest churches of the New Testament era, the highest forms of friendship were abundant among Christians as, based on their faith in the risen Christ, they sought to take

27. Mullis, *Confucius and Aristotle on the Goods of Friendship*, 394.

28. James H. Olthuis, *I Pledge You My Troth: A Christian View of Marriage, Family, and Friendship* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 107.

29. Price, *Love and Friendship in Aristotle*, 10.

30. Olthuis, *I Pledge You My Troth*, 108.

31. Olthuis, *I Pledge You My Troth*, 108.

care of each other, provide for each other, and grow each other in their pursuit of the highest good; heaven.

Although the church as a whole seemed to downplay friendship, there are many among the church fathers, through the middle ages and up until modern times, who have placed a high value on friendship inside the church. As early as the 4th century AD, writings from Augustine of Hippo place a high priority on friendship. His approval of friendship as a means for mutual religious encouragement is prominent in *City of God*.<sup>32</sup>

Bernard of Clairvaux, a French abbot of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, is considered to be the unofficial patron saint of friendship.<sup>33</sup> During the middle ages, he powerfully depicted an image of same-sex friendship in his book: *Spiritual Friendship*. His vision started a monastic movement in which it was maintained that two or more monks could achieve a holy, purified intimacy as close as family or marriage relationships. He used John 15:13 to show the ideal for friendship: that one would lay down his life for his friends.<sup>34</sup> For Bernard, the vow of celibacy would not be a sacrifice, rather it would be a pursuit of an even stronger bond between friends. <sup>35</sup>

Martin Luther, during the time of the Reformation is often depicted as a solitary monk standing alone in front of the Diet of Worms speaking: “Here I stand, I can do no other.” Yet, during many of his most difficult moments, he was surrounded by friends and supporters. While the entire Holy Roman Empire was against him, the city of Wittenberg embraced him as he sat

32. Saint Augustine, *City of God*. tr. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 1950).

33. Hill, *Spiritual Friendship*, 29.

34. Hill, *Spiritual Friendship*, 30.

35. Bernard’s encouragement to the monks to continue to develop their friendships into deeply intimate relationships has made him into a rather controversial figure in the last 50 years. Trappist monks are forbidden from reading his work lest they find encouragement there for homosexual relationships. The historian John Boswell wrote in his book: *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*: “There can be little question that Aelred was gay and that his erotic attraction to men was a dominant force in his life.”

and drank beer with the likes of Phillip Melanchthon and Nikolaus von Amsdorf. The value of friendship in the administration of the keys was even included in the Smalcald Articles.<sup>36, 37</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor serving in Germany during the World War II valued friendship as a means of communicating God's grace. He served during a time of growing distrust and suspicion as Nazism continued to take over his homeland. Just before the beginning of World War II during which he was imprisoned and executed, he wrote and taught his book: *Life Together*, which expounds on the value of Christian community for the keeping of the faith. His passion for Christian friendship and relationships jumps out on every page. "The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer."<sup>38</sup>, and "It is grace, nothing but grace that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren."<sup>39, 40</sup>

### **The Place of Friendship Among the Other Human Loves**

C.S. Lewis wrote one of the most well-known Christian expositions on the kinds of human love that exist in the Christian world. In reading most any Christian literature on the philosophy of any kind of love you will find that C.S. Lewis' work, *The Four Loves*, is treated as authoritative. Lewis explores four kinds of human love, how the types of love work in our lives, and how they

36. Smalcald Articles, III. IV. in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 319.

37. This article lists the ways that the gospel is communicated to God's people: first through the Word of God, second through Baptism, third through the Lord's Supper, and fourth through the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren. (SA, Part III, Article IV).

38. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 19.

39. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 21.

40. I recognize that each of these last paragraphs showing that friendship has had value to church leaders throughout history each could be their own thirty-page paper. The paragraphs do not characterize the foundation beliefs of the people as a whole, but they do accurately represent specific writings.

bring us closer to God. It will be helpful in characterizing friendship to see it in the context of other human relationships, and more specifically, to summarize the four loves presented by Lewis.

Lewis writes of love from the lowest form of love to the highest. The first love is affection, the most basic form of love. This love is exemplified by the Greek word *storge* defined as affection. The root of affection is in warmth and familiarity and does not require mutuality. A synonym for this type of love might be “companionship.”

The second love is friendship—the rarest and the most insightful, exemplified by the Greek word *philia*. Friendship is the type of love that modern people don’t often think of as even being a type of love. According to Lewis, this is because there are not many people who value it and even fewer people who experience it.<sup>41</sup> Yet friendship love is unique and valuable precisely because it is the least natural, the least intuitive, and the least obligatory love. “Without Eros none of us would have been begotten and without Affection none of us would have been reared; but we can live and breed without Friendship.”<sup>42</sup> He sees a downside to friendship in that it is an exclusive love: “To say ‘These are my friends.’ implies that ‘Those are not.’”<sup>43</sup>

The third love is *eros*— the “state of being in love.”<sup>44</sup> For Lewis, *eros* is much more than mere passion. For Lewis, *Eros* is the love that comes before the sexual desire. “Very often what comes first is simply a delighted pre-occupation with her in her totality. A man in this state really hasn’t leisure to think of sex. He is too busy thinking of a person.”<sup>45</sup> Outside of passion, Lewis

41. C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York, HarperCollins, 2017), 74.

42. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 74.

43. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 76.

44. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 117.

45. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 119.



also compares *eros* to the relationship of God and Jesus to mankind because of the biblical examples in which Christ is called the bridegroom of the church.<sup>46</sup> Thus, Lewis holds this *eros* love in much higher regard than the previous two.

Finally, the fourth love is charity— which is the love of God, characterized by the Greek word *agape*. This is the ultimate distillation of God’s love in the world. This is the love by which God created the world, cares for the world, and sent his Son to save the world. It is unconditional, unselfish, and sacrificial. This, for Lewis, is the culmination of the four loves.<sup>47</sup> We, as God’s people, then demonstrate this charitable kind of love in our relationships with each other.

Each one of these loves is valuable, they each show us different aspects of how God has loved us, and they each teach us how we can love each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Affection love is present in our daily lives. We experience this more surface level kind of love with our coworkers, our schoolmates, and our neighbors. *Eros* love is certainly alive and well in our culture. Although it is twisted and misunderstood to the point that it is almost unrecognizable from its ideal, the kind of love that draws two people together romantically is something that is still celebrated. Charity is even attempted even though our attempts at charity more often than not still expect something in return.

Friendship is different in the fact that it is not a natural love. For this reason it was considered to be of the highest ascetic, a value treasured highly among Greek philosophers and middle age church fathers. Lewis even compared it to an angelic love.<sup>48</sup> However, it is my

46. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 135.

47. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 162.

48. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 79.

opinion that Lewis' definition of friendship may be widened in terms of its scope.<sup>49</sup> Lewis describes friendship as having elements of companionship through which comes a kind of catharsis. More precisely, Lewis says: "Friendship arises out of mere Companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden)."<sup>50</sup> Friendship is defined here as commonality found between two people. The commonality may be a certain hobby, a certain joy, responsibility, or struggle. This definition is narrow, which obviously does not disqualify its merit, but it does present a difficult problem when digging into the Bible for insights into biblical friendship. Lewis says:

Finally, we must notice that Friendship is very rarely the image under which Scripture represents the love between God and Man. It is not entirely neglected; but far more often, seeking a symbol for the highest love of all, Scripture ignores the seemingly almost angelic relation and plunges into the depth of what is most natural and instinctive. Affection is taken as the image when God is represented as our Father; Eros, when Christ is represented as the Bridegroom of the Church.<sup>51</sup>

I would argue, then, that a broader characterization of friendship is useful to us as we go forward in this essay. When the definition of friendship is limited to earthly commonality and companionship, much of the possible value of broad friendship is lost. I suggest that in the gospel, we have commonality with fellow believers through Christ Jesus. He has made us his friends, has washed us clean in his blood, and has called us to a life of sanctification. We have all of this in common with every member of the body of Christ. Based on this commonality, I would widen the scope of Christian friendship. In Christian living, then, there are two types of

49. It is not my intention to disagree with Lewis' characterization of friendship. He writes biblically about a philosophical topic and in so doing brings beauty and clarity to a topic that for a long time had gone unnoticed in religious circles. It is my intention to build off of what he writes about friendship, and to expand it in its scope.

50. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 83.

51. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 100.

friendship. There is the intimate friendship between one or two people, which C.S. Lewis describes, but there is also a more corporate friendship which the gospel qualifies us for. All those who know Christ and have faith in him as their Savior are part of the body of Christ. To those with whom we share the commonality of Christ's own body, we owe the responsibilities of loving Christian friendship.

### **Proposed Ideal Traits**

I would like to propose four ideal qualities of biblical friendship both corporate and intimate: faithfulness, empathy, honesty, and counsel. In these qualities it may be seen how we as human beings may strive, although imperfectly, to be friends to each other.

#### Faithfulness

Apart from being one of the fruits of the spirit given to us in Galatians 5, the concept of faithfulness is common in Scripture. At Mount Sinai, God made a covenant with his people that if they were faithful to the commands he had given them, then he would be faithful to them. In this Old Testament covenant, faithfulness was an expectation and a prerequisite for the reciprocated faithfulness of God. This type of faithfulness was done away with on the cross as Jesus was fully faithful to his Father's commands and communicated to us his own faithfulness. We are now looked at by God himself as perfect, holy, and faithful people.

Our attention then, instead of being focused on our vertical faithfulness to God in the hopes of earning his favor, may be focused on our earthly relationships. Motivated by the gospel, this earthly and relational faithfulness has tremendous power. A faithful friend is one that can be counted on at all times and in all circumstances similar to a brother. As Proverbs 17:17 says: "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity."

This type of faithfulness can be seen throughout the Bible. Jonathan was faithful to David in every respect even though the King of Israel, his father, hated him and tried for years to kill him. Jonathan went so far as to risk his life out in the desert of Ziph in order to be a faithful friend. Ruth was faithful to her mother-in-law even though Naomi encouraged her to return to her parental home. Trusting in the faithfulness of God, Ruth cared for Naomi even though she had been freed from her obligation. The apostle Paul, although imprisoned, was faithful to the congregations he served, providing them pastoral care and showing his faithful friendship from afar.

Jesus, of course, is the ultimate example of faithful friendship. His faithfulness is the reason for everything that we worship about him. We worship his faithful friendship which brought him into a sinful world in order to live perfectly and die on a cross. There is no more perfect example of faithful friendship. John said in his gospel: “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends... I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” (John 15:13,15) A faithful friend is one who is selfless, constant, and loyal.

### Empathy

Empathy, the ability to understand and feel what another person is experiencing from within their frame of reference, is a trait that is also encouraged in the Bible. From the very beginning, God was empathetic to his creation. He looked at the man he created, knowing his emotional capabilities and declared: “It is not good for the man to be alone.” (Gen 2:18), and so he created woman.

Perfect empathy is modeled in Jesus. It was part of his earthly mission to live through the temptations that we face, and to fight with the urges of human flesh, but to come out victorious. He fought with the devil face to face in the desert and overcame the greatest of human temptations. He knew what it is like to hunger and thirst, to mourn and rejoice. Jesus knows our every weakness. The writer to the Hebrews puts it best:

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are— yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” (Heb 4:15-16)

This kind of empathy is also encouraged many times throughout the New Testament by the early church leaders as a fruit of faith that is able to show the light of Christ. Peter wrote in his first letter: “Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.” (1 Pet 3:8) Paul also encouraged empathy as he encouraged his readers: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” (Rom 12:15) The gospel writer John stressed the importance of empathy when he said: “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?” (1 John 3:17) An empathetic friend, then is one who listens with the heart, understands emotional joys and pains, and acts in love for good.

### Honesty

Honesty is the only characteristic of Christian friendship that was written in stone by God’s finger on Mount Sinai. Dishonesty is one of the sins that mankind has struggled with since the beginning of time. It was dishonesty by the serpent in the Garden of Eden that put doubt in Eve’s heart and brought sin into the world, and it was dishonesty that caused Adam and Even to hide

their sin from God. Yet, there is more to this aspect of friendship than the black and white of speaking everything that is right and not speaking anything that is wrong.

Human relationships have been complicated by sin, and so honesty in friendship is complicated. Proverbs 27:5-6 reveals this intricate truth: “Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.” As a Christian, it is impossible to love a friend and yet hide the truth from them. It is easy to be honest with someone without empathy. It is also easy to be empathetic with someone and not tell them the truth. This is where the challenge of honesty in friendship lies; in telling the truth yet being loving at the same time. This is the crucial challenge to take up and conquer so that we do not harm our friends by either hiding the truth from them or unnecessarily harming them. For love without honesty isn’t love and honesty without love isn’t honesty.

It is an act of deep love to tell a friend that they have done wrong. When it would be easier to sweep a matter of sin under the rug, we are encouraged to bring it out into the open so that the person may confess what they have done and so that they may receive forgiveness. This is a fruit of faith as Paul wrote in Ephesians:

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body (Eph 4:23-25).

Sometimes a friend must be honest in speaking the law to his friend when he has sinned. Just as often, though, a friend must be honest in his gospel proclamation. The previous account of Jonathan and David is an excellent example. Jonathan risked his life, his position and his future prosperity to meet David in the wilderness to speak with him honestly: “Don’t be afraid. My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to

you. Even my father knows this” (1 Sam 23:17). Jonathan spoke honestly with David in faith. He did not come to bring David secrets and insights about his father Saul, he only came to bring him the truth of God’s promises.

In the end, the command for honesty among Christians is what law and gospel are meant to be used for. This is what C.F.W. Walther taught in his lectures on the proper distinction of law and gospel: that one who truly loves his friend must condemn the sin of their friend so that they might recognize it, confess it, and receive forgiveness for it.<sup>52</sup>

Jesus, during the years of his earthly ministry, was a master of applying this principle of honest law and gospel. He knew exactly what was in people’s hearts and was able to speak to them what they needed to hear. To those struggling with a physical illness, Jesus said: “Go, your faith has healed you” (Mark 10:52, also Luke 17:19, Luke 7:50, Mark 5:34). To those whom he knew had pride in their hearts he would honestly reveal the sin in their hearts that was hidden to them, as in the case of his disciples (John 6:60-65), and as in the example of the rich young man (Matt 19:16-22). It was also evidenced many times as Jesus revealed the true hearts of the Pharisees. An honest friend, then, is one who speaks the truth in love, not hiding what is difficult, and not disparaging what should be celebrated.

### Counsel

The final characteristic of counsel flows from honesty. The same principles of speaking the truth in love while giving a friend counsel apply. The difference between honesty and counsel, though, is that honesty pursues the reconciliation of a friend, while counsel pursues the betterment and success of the friend. Proverbs 27:17 says: “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens

52. C.F.W. Walther, Thesis One. In Charles P Schaum, eds., *Law and Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 11.

another.” This is how it should be in friendship. A friend ought to be honest in love in order to build the other up.

There are many kinds of counsel that a person can receive all depending on what kind of relationship a person has with the counselor. A professional counselor gives advice based on experience, from academic learning, and based on the context that has been given. However, the counselor will not be transparent in return. On the other side, a companion or acquaintance may do the opposite and overwhelm you with transparency and self-disclosure, but will not, in the end give the counsel that is needed. A friend stands in between these two extremes. In between venting and professional counseling, a friend is able to be both transparent and offer counsel. This counsel may not be based on years of counseling experience and academic learning, but it will be based on the context of faith.

This, perhaps, is the most important function of a friend. It requires the participation of all four qualities of friendship. It takes a faithful friend to be near and willing to give counsel at the time of need. It takes an empathetic friend to listen to and understand the problem that is being struggled with. It takes an honest friend to open their mouths and speak when keeping quiet would surely be easier. The counsel that comes from such a friend with such a heart of faith will be filled with the truth of God’s Word, whether it is filled with the cutting edge of the law, or whether it is filled with the healing balm of the gospel. The counseling friend is there with God’s Word to build up his friend.

In Isaiah’s Christmas prophecy he used this terminology of counseling to describe the Savior that would come 800 years later. “For to us a child to is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). As our Wonderful Counselor, Jesus is our



guide and our wise King. Isaiah uses this word again to describe Jesus in Isaiah 28:29: “This also comes from the Lord of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom.” (ESV) Jesus is able to give us the counsel that we need to hear because he is qualified in a way that no other human counselor can be. He knows what is in each of our hearts (John 2:25) and he knows how best to guide us (Prov 3:6).

A counseling friend, one who gives advice on the basis of the Word of God, is one of the most valuable assets that a Christian can have. When problems arise, a Christian is there to fill the mind and heart of their troubled friend with God’s words. These words have an immense impact. Proverbs tells us that “oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel” (Prov 27:9). This counseling function of friendship can even be seen as the culmination and ultimate purpose of Christian friendship, as a relationship that was born in faith for the sake of overcoming adversity.

### **Boundaries of Friendship**

Faithfulness, empathy, honesty, and counsel are four ideal traits that all Christians can and ought to strive for in their relationships in their family of believers. These traits paint for us the broad definition that the Bible gives to friendship in which the body of Christ might build itself up and might even serve the world in the same friendship.

With this definition in mind, we may say that say that friendship may exist within other relationships. A husband and wife can be and should be friends outside of the duties of their

marital relationship.<sup>53</sup> Brothers and sisters can be friends in addition to the elements of their familial relationship, coworkers can be friends outside of the hierarchy of their working relationship. The traits of friendship serve these other relationships to strengthen each one.

Although friendship can be and should be broadly defined to include the entire family of believers and even the entire world, friendship also can and should be narrowly defined as an intimate relationship that only a few people share in.<sup>54</sup> Jesus loved every person that he met within his ministry, but he still gathered only a dozen disciples around him, and among them gathered only a few even more intimately around him. The Apostle Paul did similarly as he cared deeply for every congregation and city that he served, but still named those whom he loved more intimately at the end of his pastoral letters. This is the aspect of friendship that the ancient Greeks pined for, which the early Christians carried out so well, and which C.S. Lewis expounds on and praises. Yet, it is also this type of friendship which is the most difficult to create, maintain, and turn into something that lasts a lifetime or even an eternity.

53. This is not to say that a husband and wife should be each other's only friends. Such exclusivity would negate many of the benefits of friendship within the family of believers. It would also mean that existing friendships before marriage would be ended. It is extremely valuable for both husband and wife to have friendships relationships outside of marriage.

54. One might make the objection against friendship that Christians have been called to love everyone even their enemies. Indeed, this inclusive command is the second greatest command given by Jesus in Mark 12. In response, I would say that just because a person carries out an intimate and thus exclusive relationship, this does not mean that the rest of their relationships must then be loveless. It is the opposite. An exclusive and intimate relationship is one which enables the two participants to go out from their relationship full and confident in the word of Christ with the deep desire to share Christ's love in the way that they themselves experience it.

## FRIENDSHIP IN ACTION

### **Christological Friendship**

Up to this point in this essay I have defined friendship by its ideal traits and characteristics. This is a valuable technique only insofar as it gives us a biblical example to pursue as we carry out our friendships. However, in practical friendship, it is difficult and maybe even impossible to nail something like friendship, or any relationship for that matter, to something as rigid as a definition. Friendship may not be able to be defined in words, but I do know it when I see it.

It may be useful then to define friendship by another way. Often times the best way to describe something indescribable is to tell a story. This last section of the essay seeks to do just that. The obvious choice of narrative is that of Jesus as our perfect friend. As our friend he has served us and continually serves us in his three-fold office of prophet, priest, and king. In each of these duties are encapsulated elements of friendship that one friend may show to another.

The gospel gives us friendship's "why." In the narrative of Jesus as Prophet, Priest, and King, we are given friendship's "how." As friends to one another we seek to serve each other in Christ, motivated by the gospel. And just as we have each been created with unique gifts, there is great diversity in the ways that we carry out our friendships. One friend may have some of the leadership qualities of Jesus as King, another may have the blessings of the servant that Jesus embodies in his role as Priest, while others may possess the relational abilities of Jesus as our Prophet. From this, it will be seen that Christian friends, while pursuing the ideals of faithfulness, empathy, honesty, and counsel, manifest these ideals in their own Spirit-given gifts. In this way I will not so much define friendship as I will describe it as seen through a christological matrix.

### Friend as Prophet

A prophet is one who is commissioned by God to proclaim the Word of God. During Jesus' ministry, he functioned as our prophet. He traveled around the towns and villages of Judea, Samaria, and Israel preaching the good news about himself, and revealing both the condemning truth of the law, and also the saving truth about himself to the world. He spoke with divine authority in his teaching and preached in order to reach the hearts of the people who heard him. He preached the law in order to reveal people's sin and in order to point them to their need for a Savior. He preached the gospel in order to comfort them with the truth of their salvation through his blood. He functioned as a prophet in that he exposed what had already been given to the people in the words of Moses and the prophets, and in that he was able to foretell the future and declare to them that the prophecies of the Old Testament had been fulfilled in himself. He did this all with the authority of God himself.

Jesus still functions as our prophet. In much of this work, he uses us to be his spokesmen. He gave us the great commission in Matthew 28 and emphasized this sending when he spoke to his disciples on Easter Sunday: "Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (John 20:21-23). Thus, the work of the church on earth is revealed. As Daniel Deutschlander says in *Grace Abounds*:

It is the work of proclaiming the gospel with the goal of forgiving the sins of the repentant. It is the work of pronouncing God's judgement on those who do not repent (John 3:16-18). It is the work of showing believers those works which please God and those which call down his wrath (e.g., Romans 12; Galatians 5,6; Ephesians 4,6). In sum it is the work of bringing the gospel to the lost and strengthening those who already believe it, so that their lives may more and more reflect their faith.<sup>55</sup>

55. Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds* (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House, 2015) 322.

Is this not the goal of every friendship: to serve each other in God's Word, to bring them the law and gospel, and to encourage them in their lives of faith? Every Christian may serve as prophet to another, constantly able to be an earthly physical presence who honestly and faithfully reprimands when the law is needed and who joyfully preaches the good news of Christ crucified and risen again. This task is even more beautifully and precisely carried out in intimate friendships in which one friend knows another well enough to be privy to the details of the other's life. This is both an immeasurable joy and a heavy responsibility of friendship.

This aspect of friendship may sound more glorious on paper than in the real world. When a dear friend is erring, the bravery that is required to admonish that person is immense. It has already been discussed that friendship is perhaps the most fragile relationship that exists. There is no commitment involved, there is often no other bond besides proximity which binds the two together. When a friend acts as a prophet who carries out the strange work of the law, that friend risks much; an argument, disdain, and heartbreak if that friendship is broken. Yet this is what we, as Christians, have been called to do. We do what is not easy, and we do what may hurt us in order to bring about the strengthening of our friend. When a friend understands that you are speaking in love, and in faith repents, then comes the glory, relief, and deepening of the relationship. As prophets we lovingly tell our friends the truth of Scripture: that we are sinful, and that we have a dying need for a Savior. In doing this we acknowledge that our friendships are gifts that have been given to us by God for precisely these times of adversity.

Friendships that are given purpose by the gospel have an advantage in their roles as prophets. Without the gospel, the only thing that can be given is subjective advice based only on human experience, and the only comfort that can be given is comfort based in optimism with the

hope that everything will eventually turn around. In the gospel, we speak with the authority of our faith. We may give correct counsel based in God's Word which leads towards the strengthening of faith and towards repentance and reconciliation. Greatest of all we may speak comfort as Jonathan spoke to David in a hopeless situation: "Don't be afraid" (1 Sam 23:17). In Christian friendship we speak these words not out of optimism, but out of certain faith that we have no reason to fear, for our God is with us.

### Priestly Friendship

The work of an Old Testament priest was to offer sacrifices for the people and to intercede with God on their behalf. The high priest was set apart from the rest of the population and was chosen specifically for his special work. He was set apart from the community "to symbolize that in his person and work he was separate as the special and holy intermediary between God and his people."<sup>56</sup> Jesus was the fulfillment of the purity of the Old Testament priests. He did not need to symbolically set himself apart from the people, because he truly was set apart by his holiness. Christ not only fit the description of a priest, he also was a sacrifice. His blood was shed on the cross in order to atone for the sins of all people.

Jesus still functions as our priest today as he continues to intercede for us on the virtue of his sacrifice for us. John describes this intercession beautifully in his first letter: "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:1-2). At any

56. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 323.

moment of any day, we may pray for forgiveness and we may be sure that our Great High Priest is in action on our behalf before his Father's throne.

There are many aspects of Christ's work as priest that we may carry out in our friendships. The book of Hebrews, a book of the Bible dedicated to expounding the glory and significance of Christ's priestly work, illustrates on them. In chapter 2:17, the writer says: "For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people." We, in our friendships seek to be merciful and faithful. Seeing a dear friend in need, our hearts go out to them to aid them in any way we can whether emotionally, spiritually, or physically. In mercy, we do not turn away a friend who has wronged us, but we offer them the forgiveness that Christ has won for us. In faithfulness, we seek to be by our friends' sides both in good times and bad. Hebrews 10:10 tells us more: "And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." A true friend is willing to make sacrifices for the one he loves. As Christ sacrificed his life on the cross in order to earn forgiveness for us, and as Jonathan went out into the wilderness risking everything in order to comfort David, so does a friend go out of his way out of love for his friend. Friendship is not always convenient; in fact, it rarely is.

Peter adds another element in his letter: "'He himself bore our sins' in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by his wounds you have been healed'" (1 Pet 2:24). Jesus sacrificed himself for no other motivation than out of love for us. This is a trait of friendship that any person would be incredibly blessed to find in another. It is rare to find motivation like this in another that is so completely unselfish.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, as Jesus prays for us and intercedes for us to his Father, so friends also pray for each other. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Jesus as our priest knows us intimately. He is familiar with our weaknesses, the temptations that we face. As our perfect friend, he overcame weakness, and fought off temptation to give us the right to approach God's throne of grace. As our perfect friend who knows our flaws intimately, he knows exactly how to pray for us. As Christian friends, even at the least intimate level, we know each other's sinful hearts, and we may pray for them knowing and trusting that God hears and answers these prayers. At the most intimate level, friends can pray specifically. Friends pray out of thankfulness for the gifts that God has given their dear friend, out of joy for the victories their friend experiences, out of concern for a friend as they fight with a certain temptation, out of sorrow as a friend deals with a particular hardship, and in any and every other situation of life.<sup>57</sup>

### Kingly Friendship

Finally, a king's duty is to rule his people. He is to lead his people in the way that is best for them, he is to fight for them and protect them from evil, and he is to provide for them in every way he can. Jesus fulfills his kingly duties in his current exalted state. He rules over all things in heaven, on earth, and under the earth. He knows and controls all things on behalf of his people. Although it may seem like the church and the entire world is constantly on the brink of collapse, we are told that we may trust that Christ's rule will never be overcome. (Matt 16:18) On the last day, Jesus will come with all his kingly glory to take those who believe in him to be with him forever in heaven.

<sup>57</sup>. The roles of friend as prophet and friend and priest work wonderfully together. A friend as prophet calls the other to repentance. The friend then in his priestly role goes to God in prayer asking for healing for the other. James 5:16 lays this out: "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."



In his kingly leadership, Jesus shows us more aspects of Christian friends. He stated many times throughout his ministry that he did not come into the world to be an earthly king. As he revealed in his conversation with Pontius Pilate: “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth” (John 18:37). Jesus did not come for glory or political gain. He came in order to reveal truth. In the context of kingship, this shows us the humility of Jesus. This aspect of servant leadership is something which we may pursue in our friendships. When a friendship is pursued with humility and selflessness, there will be great gain indeed. These friends are our honest advisors; ones who truly have our spiritual gain as their primary goal.

Jesus also in his kingly work enables his people to serve him as can be seen in 1 Corinthians 12:27: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues.” In an intimate friendship we are able to motivate each other with the good news of the gospel to use our gifts in service of God’s kingdom.<sup>58</sup> God has created each one of us to be unique, with different gifts and abilities. In Christian friendship, as humble leaders, we can help each other recognize these gifts.

A king goes to war for the good of his people when there is an enemy threatening to destroy what is good. Jesus went to war with the devil and gave his life to declare victory forever. We may also go to war on behalf of our friends. There are many more bullies in the world than just on the playgrounds of our childhoods. The world is filled with forces that do not

58. This motivation may come in as simple a manner as one friend using their gift of positivity in order to help the other recognize that the faith and spiritual gifts that they have been given are more than enough to serve God in a beautiful way. The motivation may also come in a complex manner, and over time as both friends function as both prophet and priest to each other, calling one another to repentance and bringing the comfort of the gospel over and over again. The life of sanctification is a long one. And so, God places friends at our sides who wield the word of God, selflessly leading us on to be the people that God intends us to be.

want friendship to succeed. It is impossible to stand up to every bully, to weather the attacks against Christian beliefs alone. This is why the writer to the Hebrews encouraged us to never give up meeting together so that we may continually encourage each other and strengthen each other for the lifelong fight against the devil (Heb 10:25).

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has been written in praise of friendship and its purpose through the gospel for mutual encouragement and spiritual growth. In truth, this goal is rarely realized. Friendship is often thought of as companionship, as a relationship that thrives only in commonality. For most people, these shallow friendship relationships that are made are not strong enough to stand the tests of life, and the result is that friendship is not a significant part of their lives.

The gospel qualifies us for much more meaningful friendships. It qualifies us for broad friendship with the entire body of Christ with the purpose of serving each other in broad friendship, and it qualifies us uniquely for intimate and specific friendship. In all of these friendships we use our spiritual gifts to bless each other as we admonish, absolve, and encourage each other in a myriad of different ways. This is friendship gifted to us in love by God, based on the love of God, and created for the love of God.

I have been blessed with extraordinary Christian friendships. I have friends that I have known since I was two years old, I have friends with whom I have traveled the world, I have friends who have been alongside me in my pastoral studies for almost twelve years, and I have a wife who is also my best friend. Each relationship has blessed me richly and each relationship has blessed me differently. One friend is my rock, another is my guide, and still yet another is the

one I go to confess the sins on my conscience so that I can hear from them the forgiveness I need so dearly. God has given me friends for times of need who have supported me time and again. They are truly a gift of his grace.

I strive to be the friend for others that my friends have been for me. In the end, this is how friendship achieves its highest purpose. It works first inside of us and fills us up with confidence and grace so that we can work in God's world to be friends to the world and bring them into friendship with Christ. Friendships like this can overcome any barrier and can last into eternity. Friendship achieves its purpose in the gospel when it strengthens faith. It also fills us with the purpose to go out into the world with the good news about Jesus to bring others into friendship with Christ.

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