Cultivating Friendship

Second in the series: Life Skills for Happiness and Success

# Scripture: Romans 12:6-16; Acts 4:32a; 1 Peter 1:22-25

# Key idea: God’s love strengthens friendships.

# Intro:

An English publication once offered a prize for the best definition of a friend. They received thousands of answers. Here were some of the best.

– One who multiplies joys and divides grief.

– One who understands our silence.

– A volume of sympathy bound in cloth.

But here is the definition that won the prize:

– A friend is the one who comes in when the whole world has gone out. (7700 #1792)

Today’s message is part of a series for the month of September called “Life Skills for Happiness and Success.” Last week I spoke about the importance of building character, not just when we are young, but all through our lives. This morning, our topic is friendship.

Like so many things, friendship seems to come more naturally to some. Take my granddaughter Annabelle. At 2 1/2 she walked into her new nursery school on the first day and announced, “Hi friends, this is my new school!” Well, some people have a knack for everything, but all of us desire friends.

# We need and seek friendship

## We seek friends

I have observed that we instinctively know that having friends is a good thing. But we really don’t know how good it is. It turns out that having a network of friends is good for our health, our physical, emotional, and spiritual health. For example, consider this finding reported in the Science Journal some years ago now.

***“The lack of social relationships constitutes a major risk factor for health that rivals in importance the effects of such well-established health factors as cigarette smoking, blood pressure, blood lipids, exercise and obesity.” (from July 29 1988 issue of Science journal quoted in the Healing Power of Doing Good p. 31)***

### Social media friendship is inadequate

The popularity of social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram today illustrate our hunger for friendship. More than one billion people are active on Facebook. And more than 100 million people use Instagram every month. Yet the social media type of friendship by itself is so shallow. It lacks the personal presence of face-to-face encounter.

### People look for good friends at church too

Some years ago, at my first church, we did a survey of adult Sunday school classes. They were Bible study small groups that met right after or right before the worship service. We asked why people attended adult classes. The answer came back – for fellowship. They were looking for friendship.

At my second church, many younger people told me that the search for friendship was also one key reason they attended church at all. They were looking for people of like values who might become their friends. They were looking for face to face friends, people they could interact with. They wanted to build the bridges of “brotherly love” – friendship love.

### Copper Hill Fellowship times

I suspect the same is true here at Copper Hill Church too. One of the things we hope happens as we attend church is that we find friends. And by my observations, I think I see that happening. Maybe that’s one of the reasons we have Coffee hour Sunday today and once every month, usually on the second Sunday. I know it is one of the reasons for small groups at our church.

# God's Word teaches us how to love as friends

Is this just a social thing? Or is there a Biblical reason for increased friendship connections at church? I would suggest that one of the benefits of Christian discipleship is that God’s Word teaches us how to love. These lessons benefit us in our families, and in our friendships. Let’s look at the text we read as an example.

## Three Greek words for love in Romans 12:9, 10

The key idea for today comes from just two verses of the text we read.

**Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Rom 12:9-10 NIV**

Now in the English language, we use the word love for all kinds of different things. But the language in which the NT was originally written – the Greek language– has several different words for love and three of them are in these two verses. Paul is so desirous that the people to whom he is writing be loving toward one another that he piles up the words for love in one verse to make a point. He has three different words for love in these verses—agape (unselfish and self-giving love), “philadelphia” (brotherly love or friendship love) and “philostorge” (family affection).

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| verse | Greek word | NIV translation | NRSV translation |
| Rom. 12:9 | agape | love | love |
| Rom. 12:10 | philadelphia | love | mutual affection |
| Rom. 12:10 | philostorge | be devoted | love |

One of the Greek words that is translated as love here has to do with the love we have for one another in the body of Christ. It is the word from which the city of Philadelphia gets is name. It means literally “brotherly love.” It refers to the affection that members of the body of Christ have for each other. It is the love of friendship. Often this word occurs in close relationship with the stronger NT word for love – agape- and seems to draw some of its ethos from it. Agape love is an unselfish and self-giving love, certainly desirable qualities for the affection of friendship as well.

## We are commanded to keep growing in love

The Apostle Peter, in his first letter, also points to a close relationship between friendship love and “agape” love.

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love (philadelphia) for your brothers, love one another (agape) deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. 1 Pe 1:22-23 NIV

This Biblical “agape” love is the unselfish, committed love that God has for us. This is the type of love that led Jesus to deny himself and go to the Cross for us. This is the kind of love that is the fruit of the Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives (Gal. 5:22). This is the love that we learn from Jesus.

So, we can conclude that the affection we have as friends is a great place to show also the agape love that Jesus teaches us. The agape love that Jesus teaches us will help us to love much more deeply and unselfishly as friends.

## The Holy Spirit teaches us to love each other.

In another place, Paul reminds us that God’s Spirit is teaching us how to love as friends.

Now about brotherly love (philadelphia) we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love (agape) each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more. 1 Th 4:9-10 NIV

First, the Word of God guides us to suppress and eliminate behaviors that work against friendship—behaviors like lack of honesty, immorality, backbiting, slander, bitterness, etc. Then God’s Word and His Spirit energize in us positive behaviors that build friendship – speech that builds up, compassion, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep, forgiveness, speaking the truth in love, kindness, joy, gentleness, faithfulness, etc. We are equipped by the Holy Spirit to be better friends.

### God’s love helps us prioritize friendship

Another important way that God helps us to be better friends is to help us to prioritize caring. Too many people today are far too busy with themselves to be friends. But when we are actively following Jesus’ example, he leads us to give priority to the needs of friends.

Some years ago, I read a touching illustration of someone giving priority to a friend. Sam Rayburn, a Democratic leader from Texas, served for more than forty-eight years in the U.S. House of Representatives (1913-61), including seventeen years as speaker. At the height of his career, he was one of the most powerful men in the world, but he never outgrew his friends.

One night, a friend's teenage daughter passed away. Early the next morning the man heard a knock on his door and when he opened it, there was Mr. Rayburn standing outside.

"I just came by to see what I could do to help," said Rayburn.

"I don't think there is anything you can do, Mr. Speaker;' said the broken father. "We are making all the arrangements."

"Well,” Mr. Rayburn said, "have you had your coffee this morning?"

The man replied that they had not taken time for breakfast. So Mr. Rayburn said that he could at least make coffee for them. While he was working in the kitchen, the man came in and said, "Mr. Speaker, I thought you were supposed to be having breakfast at the White House this morning."

"Well, I was," Rayburn said, "but I called the President and told him I had a friend who was in trouble, and I couldn't come."

Sam Rayburn was following Jesus’ example of noticing the need of a friend and meeting that need. Friendship love knows how to give priority to friendship.

## Instructions here that enhance friendship

Look for a moment at the instructions in just this small section of Scripture that we read today that will help us to be great friends.

* Let love be sincere – v. 9 The original word means literally “without hypocrisy.” The number one thing we hate in relationships in when the other person is faking, putting up false fronts, being hypocritical. Paul gives great advice, “love sincerely.”
* Verse 10 encourages humility. “Honor one another above yourselves.” Today it’s popular to “toot your own horn.” But who likes a friend who always has a story to tell that is a little better than yours? But a friend who encourages you to excel, even at something they also do – that is a true friend.
* Verse 12 is about attitude in difficult times – That’s often when we turn to a friend, right – when things are not going well. How many of you would like to have a friend who was joyful, hopeful, patient and prayerful when things go wrong? Some of you probably have friend who are is, pessimistic, impatient and quick to curse when things go wrong. And you try to avoid them sometimes. What a contrast. What a lesson in the subtle ways that following the Holy Spirit’s teachings helps us to be truly loving in relationships.
* Verse 13 is about sharing when someone is in need. This is basic for friendship.
* Verse 13 also mentions hospitality. Today there are more ways to show hospitality than just the traditional idea of having someone over for dinner. We have outdoor cookouts or campfires. We take people out to lunch or breakfast and pay the bill. We might host a committee meeting at our home or on our deck. These are also ways to show hospitality. The bottom line though is that hospitality is essential to friendship. When we invite the other person into our space, they feel deeply accepted and our relationship grows closer.
* Verse 15 – rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep. If your neighbor invites you to a family wedding – go. It’s basic friendship. If she has the misfortune to lose a loved one and you can find out that there are public viewing hours, stop by. ave empathy. When the neighbor gets a new car, don’t get jealous, rejoice with them. This is an encouragement to be empathetic in friendship.
* Verse 16 – live in harmony – go the extra mile to keep the peace if possible.

See how the admonitions of Holy Scripture help us to be solid friends. Blessed is the man or woman who has a friend who reads and seeks to follow the Bible’s advice. That person will be the best of friends too.

# God's family supplies a warm circle of friendship

There is also something collectively about the family of God that provides a warm circle of friendship.

## Examples of Great Friendships of the Bible

It is interesting to note the many examples of rich friendships in the Bible.

In the Old Testament we find the stories of

* David and Jonathan
* Ruth and Naomi
* Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego

In the New Testament, there are also many accounts of friendship.

* Jesus, Lazarus, Mary and Martha
* Jesus and his disciples especially his inner circle (remember the verse (“I have called you friends”)). Jesus’ method of discipleship for his closest leaders involved friendship.
* Paul, Aquila and Priscilla

Especially the friendships of Jesus give us a solid example as to the importance of friendship. When we have friendships, we are following Jesus’ example.

## The church is a circle of friendship

It is the nature of the church family that Jesus has created to supply a warm circle of friendship. If we have opened our heart to Jesus, then we have the engaging and amiable presence of God’s Spirit in us. This presence in all believers creates a warm unity.

Remember that the words for the church in the NT are all collective words. We were not intended to be lone ranger Christians.

The church is called the Body of Christ with many parts.

The word church itself usually is a translation for the Greek “ekklesia” which means literally the called-out assembly. The church is the group of people God has called together to follow Jesus.

Christians as a group are referred to as the “sheep” of God’s pasture. We are his flock. If a sheep is wandering alone, it is lost. Sheep move as a flock. Flock is a collective word.

After Pentecost, this togetherness was exemplified in unusual ways by the early church. Luke summarized the situation in his short history of the earliest days of the church, the book of Acts,

All the believers were one in heart and mind. Acts 4:32 NIV

## 3 suggested YouVersion Bible App Plans on friendship

Recently I have been encouraging all of you with cell phones to get the YouVerson Bible App and use it to enrich your week spiritually. Here are the titles of three Bible reading and devotional plans on the App that focus on the theme of friendship.

Friendship

Messy Beautiful Friendship

Friends R Us