

Relationships: Friends and Me

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I started seminary in the summer of 1999 and I jumped in the deep end. My first class was summer Greek; an 8 week crash course on the fine details of the original NT language. Little did I know that my best friend during my seminary years and a number of years beyond was sitting next to me on that very first day; his name is Jeff. Jeff and I started our seminary experience together. It's funny who you can become friends with sometimes because Jeff and I are very, very different; so much so that it would take too long listing all of those details. Yet, we shared in common the things that mattered most - we had common beliefs and commitments. And over the next 2 years in seminary, Jeff and I did almost everything together. We took classes together, we studied together, we had lunch together when our wives were busy working; it also got deep as we shared our frustrations, hopes, and needs with each other. We were best friends.

I got a job first. Korby's home church called looking for a pastor who didn't know anything; I was perfect for the job and said yes. I remember our moving day quite well. We rented a big U-Haul truck and backed it up to the front door of our seminary apartment complex; our small group from church (another band of friends we made) were there to help us pack and move all day long. Our first born, Elijah, was just a few months old. Jeff pretty much stayed inside the truck making sure everything was packed just right. Towards the end of the afternoon, things were quieting down. Korby had already left with Elijah and her parents. I had said goodbye to all of our church friends who had come to help. Jeff and I shut the door to the truck and went up stairs to his apartment for a glass of lemonade before I hit the road. I remember it being a relaxing moment, but I didn't stay long. I don't recall what we talked about. When I got up to go and say goodbye to Jeff, I gave Jeff one of those manly hugs (you know the type). But it quickly got awkward because I couldn't let go. I just started crying. I tried to hide it, but I couldn't. Jeff knew; his wife could see. And I just cried for a time. It totally caught me by surprise. I didn't realize how much my friend meant to me and how much I would miss him.

Author Gordon MacDonald calls people like Jeff *capital-F* friends. Capital-F friends aren't just people who you like or spend time with; Capital-F friends are people *who know your heart and you know theirs*. These kinds of friends don't just serve your social interests or needs; they are strategic friends who truly walk with you through the important matters of life and faith. They are the people you invite into the interior of your heart and soul. MacDonald writes in his book, *Ordering Your Private World*, about his capital-F friends:

A couple of them are thinking friends; we talk about ideas and questions.

A couple are my encouragement friends; we keep close tabs on each other.

There are my wisdom friends; we give each other judgment, counsel.

There is my spiritual life friend; we do a lot of talking about Jesus.

All of them are my fun friends: we do crazy things together.

Jeff was a capital-F friend. He was for me what MacDonald says in his book. Yes, we did simple things with and for each other like having lunch or helping each other move. But it went deeper than that, too. We would talk about our disappointments, our fears, our hopes and aspirations. Long before I ever read MacDonald's book, I knew God was using Jeff in my life to make me a more godly man. And that's the point of these types of friends; MacDonald writes...

I do not believe that we can have ordered private worlds if we do not have Capital-F friends. Ordering one's private world is not a one-person event. Too much of what God wants to say into our lives will be said through other people who are close... to us. It is friends who will rebuke us, affirm us, advise us, and be there for us when the roof caves in.

The goal today is to examine our need for friends; to be more particular, the kinds of friends MacDonald is talking about. Is it true that we need these kinds of friends to maintain a healthy spiritual life? Is there any support in the scriptures for such things? And if so, how do we get these kinds of friends?

It's always good for us to start in the scriptures; I want to show you two passages that I think support our need for these kinds of friends. First, let's turn to 2 Tim. 1:15-18 (READ).

Two kinds of friends are compared in this passage by Paul. The first kind none of us need or want. It's the kind that take off at the first sign of trouble or sacrifice. Phylegus and Hermogenes were among many who turned their back on Paul when the gospel work started getting a little difficult. Consider this: changes or alterations to your faith will always make a relational impact. We've talked about this stuff before, but we are never privately Christian; our faith is not merely something we think. Authentic faith is lived on a daily basis. And the first place we instantiate our faith is in our relationships. So when Phylegus and Hermogenes abandoned their faith it impacted the kinds of friends and partners they would be..

I remember when my father passed I got angry at some of my mother's friends. Do you know why? When my mother needed them the most they were a little too busy, too distracted, too preoccupied to be there for her. She was left alone only making her sorrow worse. Now, to be fair to them, I've come to learn that we oftentimes don't know how to be a good friend in times of need. We are often intimidated by the needs of our friends; or we are fearful about how to respond and we feel inadequate. And what we typically do in these hard situations is withdraw, which is understandable, but not very helpful (or very friendly).

Good, supportive friends don't withdraw. I know at times it can be fearful and confusing during life's tragic times, but stay engaged and be present. It's ok to say, "I'm struggling to know how to be a good friend to you. I don't have any answers, but I'm not going to leave you." Write notes of encouragement. Arrange a day of fishing or shopping. Pray continually. And keep being a friend.

Look at Onesiphorus; Paul says there in vs. 16-17 that Onesiphorus “often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains.” That’s an important phrase. Paul was imprisoned because of his faith; he was in jail because he wasn’t willing to compromise on his commitment to Jesus. Onesiphorus was not ashamed of that, which means, he wasn’t ashamed of having faith in Jesus either.

You know, it’s hard having unwavering faith. I mean, sure, when everything is working out faith is easy. But when life is hard, when nothing seems to be going well, faith becomes more of a challenge. I would say being in prison qualifies as a tempting challenge. While Paul didn’t compromise, that doesn’t mean he wasn’t tempted to compromise. One of the blessings of capital-F friendships is that they strengthen faith when it’s weak. When I hear a friend say, “Brian, keep going! It’s worth it. Don’t stop” resolve grows in me. When I see a friend remain hopeful in the face of difficulty, hope in me rises more, too. If you want to be a good friend, keep cultivating your own faith in Jesus and encourage it in others; that in itself is a gift of friendship. And it will return to you because a day will come when you’ll struggle and your friend’s faith will build you up, too.

I want to comment on one more observation from Onesiphorus’ example; it says in vs. 17 that he searched for Paul earnestly until he found him. Prison in the 1st century wasn’t quite like today’s. Paul wasn’t kept in an obvious, well-known area. He was kept somewhat in secret. So, Onesiphorus shows up in Rome looking for Paul, but can’t find him. So he keeps looking. He asks around; he follows one lead to the next. He carves out more of us time; he spends more of his money. And the whole time he’s thinking, “I’ve got to find Paul. He needs a friend; he needs some encouragement.” I want a friend like Onesiphorus; and I want to be a friend like Onesiphorus. But we have to recognize the sacrifice that comes with that. So, be eternally grateful if you have a friend like that and be prepared to sacrifice to be like that.

The second passage I want to show is Heb. 3:12-13; let’s turn there and read that (READ). There’s a lot in these two verses, but let’s focus on the aspect of friendship being a necessary component to our growth in faith. We don’t want an evil, unbelieving heart, obviously. And I hope you feel the temptation towards that; I know I do. Don’t fool yourself into thinking you are above the temptation of having an evil, unbelieving heart. We just might some day. That’s the whole point of the verse - take care (be careful) that you don’t!

Vs. 13 answers this question: How does God keep us from falling away? How will God spare me from having an evil, unbelieving heart? The answer in vs. 13 is, “Exhort (encourage with the truth) one another daily, as long as it is called ‘today’, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

Who’s going to do that for you? Who is going to be the person who cares for you so much, who is willing to make great personal sacrifices for your spiritual well-being, and who you are going to listen to you when they say, “be careful!”? Right now, for you, who’s that person? Because it won’t be just anyone, right? Chances are there are only a few people you would trust

and respect to provide for you the kind of encouragement and warning to keep you faithful in your faith while you're being tempted. We don't deputize people here to do this. That probably wouldn't be very helpful to you, would it? To receive the kind of exhortation that's going to keep our soul safe, it's going to need to come from a friend who sticks closer than a brother; it's going to be a sister from another mister, am I right?

This Hebrews 3 passage tells me I better have a friend who will help me like this because I don't want to fall away. So, I better have a friend like this. I better cultivate a deep friendship, an abiding trust in this friend. I better let this friend know I want this from him; I better invite him into the interior of my life where he's not afraid I'm going to get angry at him for not minding his business. I need a friend who says, "Brian's well being is my business because I'm his friend.

So, how do you get a friend like that? Have you noticed: Capital-F friends don't grow on trees. I began this sermon telling you about my friendship with Jeff. My appreciation for Jeff has only grown through the years because I've also have had periods in my life where I haven't had a friend like that; where I've felt very much alone not having someone close like that. And maybe that's one of your great sadnesses in life; your inability to make lasting, caring friendships. So, here are some thoughts about that.

First of all, pray. It's not easy finding these kinds of friends. We need God's help finding, keeping, and cultivating these kinds of friendships. Let's not forget that at the core of our faith, our hope is in God's work for us. We respond in faithful obedience, but before we can put our faith into action, we need God to work on our behalf. So, pray.

Secondly (as we move into action, but still trust in God's work for us), pray to be a good friend. If I could so humbly say, I think we are our own biggest obstacles in finding friends like this. We don't have good friends because we aren't good friends ourselves. Now, like I suggested earlier, at times that's because we really don't know how to be good friends or we are lacking the courage to be a good friend. Let me give you an example of both.

First of all, sometimes we sabotage potential friendships because we have unrealistic expectations. Too often, I've noticed some people pushing away the very people they hope to be friends with because they want and expect too much. It's unrealistic to think a person can be everything for you. It's unrealistic to think your friend can meet all your needs or desires. It's unrealistic to think your friend doesn't need other friends (and spend time with them as well as you). It's unrealistic to think your friend doesn't need his or her own personal time or family time. It's unrealistic to think that your friend always wants to listen to you, but you never want to listen to them. Do you see what I'm saying? When we have unrealistic expectations, we doom potential friendships. Developing friendships is an important and challenging life-skill. Ask for help if you're struggling.

We also need courage to be a good friend. Courage in this way: you've got to put yourself out there a little bit. You have to be willing to open up your heart some to a friend for them to know you and speak into your life with encouragement. Your vulnerability to a friend is a way you can communicate that you're ready for a more personal kind of friendship and it's a way you can gauge if your buddy is up for that. If you don't take a courageous step and be open to others, your relationships will only stay in the social dimension. And that's good for many of our friendships. We need a social life and that serves an important need we all have. But to get a capital-F friend, to be a little more personally connected with a few of our friends, we need to be a little more vulnerable. We have to take some risks. And risks require courage.

One more piece of advice in finding friends: you have to kind of... date. Do you remember when you used to date? Maybe you'd scan a room of people and you had an eye for 2 or 3 and you were like, "I'd like to get to know them better." Sometimes, that's what we need to do to develop friendships. It can start slow with going golfing together, shopping, or breakfast. You start sharing safe information and progress from there. And you want to pay attention to a several things. 1) Do you like spending time with this person? Do you enjoy yourself and does it seem like they are enjoying themselves? Can you have fun? 2) How does your new friend answer or respond to your questions? Do they just give one-word answers? Do they seem willing to open up their life a little bit or does it stay superficial. And finally, and very importantly 3), pay attention to the questions they ask you. Do they want to get to know you as much as you want to get to them? Do they ask you any questions or are you the only one asking the questions? That will help you discover if there is potential with this new friend.

I'll quote MacDonald one more time; he says, "Capital-F friends love one another. They flesh out the words of John, the disciple, who wrote: 'This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ [the ultimate capital-F friend] laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.'" Do you have one of those, FBC? Do you have a friend who knows your heart? Do you have a friend that you've invited into the interior of your life? Let's pray now that if not God might give one to you.

Key vs. Heb. 3:12-13

#### Questions for the week

- Do you currently have a friend you trust very deeply? Have you ever had that kind of a friend? What would you consider are the greatest blessings of friendship?
- What stood out to you from 2 Tim. 1 and Heb. 3? Why?
- Do you believe finding an enduring friend is important to your faith? What truth about God do you need to remind yourself of in order to risk vulnerability with a friend?