

May 7, 2006
 Being True Friends in Very Tough Times
 Proverbs 17:17 / II Timothy 1:15-18 / Job 6:14-30

If I were to ask you, right now, "Who are your BEST friends?" Who comes to mind? Who do you think of? And again, with that person, or those particular people in mind, let me ask you another question: "What is it about that person (or those people) that makes you consider them to be your BEST friends?"

You see, I could have entitled my message: "WHY We Need Friends," or better yet, "What We Really NEED From Our Friends." Because that's what this passage is about...Friendship. And not just friendship, but friendship of a spiritual sort. Friendship that either wavers, or is safe and secure, depending on how one of those friends perceives God, or relates to God.

In our text for this morning Job expresses his disappointment with his friends. A disappointment that stemmed from the fact that they were NOT what he felt friends should be, and definitely NOT what he needed them to be at this time in his life. They were not what true friends should be.

Which is why he equates them with undependable, intermittent streams, that are swollen and overflow with the run off of thawing ice and melting snow in the Spring, but are dry, barren river beds in the drought of summer, when their refreshing waters are needed the most! (v.15-21).

And in expressing his disappointment, he gives us the one key element above all others that he feels should define TRUE friendship: Undying loyalty.

A spiritual friend is a person who has an inner determination, and relational commitment that refuses to give up on a friend—a once devout Christian friend who now shows no signs of being devout or Christian at all. ***A determination to stick with, or stick by that person... (listen)... EVEN IF THEY FORSAKE THE FEAR OF THE ALMIGHTY***, as Job says in v. 14.

In fact, Job (in v. 29) basically says, (the word relent here is the same Hebrew word translated repent elsewhere) it isn't HE who needs to repent of some secret SIN, as much as it is THEY who need to "repent" of the MORE OBVIOUS SIN of being unjust, by failing to be the type of friends that friends are supposed to be!

Did you know that? That withdrawing friendship from a despairing friend, or refusing to be a good friend to despairing brother or sister in Christ, is a sin that calls for repentance on our part?
A sin that we need to repent of?

So, let me share with you how it is that we can be true friends, even in very, very trying times. Because that's what Job pleads for in this passage. And in doing so he not only tells us what such friendship consists of, but also why we need to be such friends to our friends.

You see it's easy for us as Christians to be a devout friend when our friends are doing well... spiritually. When they are carrying their own weight, and doing all the right things, or "walking the walk and talking the talk," so to speak.

But what Job pleads for today is for us to be devout friends even when our friends are NOT doing well spiritually. When they are down, and gloomy faced, and in pain, and doubting, and struggling, and pessimistic, and even irreverent—when as Job puts it—they are despairing, and have forsaken the fear of the Almighty.

You probably all know someone who once seemed so devout, and vibrant, and full of faith and life—spiritual life—only to see them lose the fear of God they seemed to possess—that HEALTHY fear of God that once evidenced itself in a demeanor of reverence for God, and a lifestyle of moral integrity, and a love for divine things, and a desire to see others come to know Jesus.

Yet then struggles and trials came—severe ones—and because of those inward struggles with physical or emotional trauma, they appear to have lost everything they once appeared to have. Which leaves us to ask: What should I do? How should I relate to them? How long should I befriend them? Where do I draw the line? When do I move on (so to speak) and invest my time and energies into more productive endeavors, or friendships with people who are more spiritually stable?

Those are some of the questions I'd like to address today from this passage, beginning **FIRST** with this one—"Why do we NEED devout, committed spiritual friends?" It's a question Job answers for us (somewhat paradoxically) by reading verse 14 in a different version!

You see, the Hebrew in this passage (according to some commentators) is difficult to interpret. Thus some versions (like the NIV) translate verse 14: "A despairing man should have the devotion of his friends, EVEN THOUGH he forsakes the fear of the Almighty." And that is a legitimate translation of the Hebrew in its context.

But as the NASB (and others) also show us, the verse could also be translated this way: ***“For the despairing man there should be kindness from his friend, SO THAT HE DOES NOT FORSAKE the fear of the Almighty.”***

One says we should stick by him even if he does, the other says we should stick by him so that he doesn't! And BOTH have an element of truth to them. But for this first point I want to focus on the second—the sense that devout friends can actually prevent us from forsaking the fear of the Almighty.

Solomon, speaking of friendship in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, says:

“Two are better than one...for if one falls, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can fend off an attacker, and a cord of three strands is not easily broken.”

Likewise, King David said of his friend Jonathan, that Jonathan's friendship had “Strengthened his hand in God.” That is, David had derived spiritual strength from the support and encouragement of his friend Jonathan.

“Our friends,” says Brenda Hunter, “are among life's greatest treasures. They help us negotiate the difficult hurdles of life.”

And Addison once wrote: “Friendship improves happiness, and abates misery; doubling our joy, and dividing our grief.”

It's true. We do derive strength from our friendships with others—even non-believers can see that. And nowhere is that more true than in the living of the Christian life, where to be devoid of spiritual friends and the strength and encouragement and accountability and comfort they can and do offer is disastrous!

And God knows that! Which is why He wisely determined that becoming a Christian would NOT merely be a matter of being “saved” in some private, isolated, individualistic, lone ranger type style, but rather, would be a matter of being saved into the fellowship of the Church—into a community of faith—into a family or fellowship of like-minded believers who know that the Christian life is NOT lived out on some spiritually and morally neutral playing field!

The Bible tells us we live in a fallen world where SATAN, though defeated, is still a viable foe. God is KING, but Satan is still “the prince of this world,” or “The prince of the power of the air,” as Paul calls him. One who “roams about like a roaring lion looking for whom he may devour” as Peter puts it.

“We war,” says Paul, “not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers and authorities and powers of this dark world — against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12). Meaning there is a sense in which the Christian is engaged in spiritual warfare—and it’s always dangerous to fight a war alone!

Likewise the WORLD constantly bombards us with pictures, and images and messages and ideas and philosophies aimed at getting us to question our faith, doubt God’s sovereignty, and join them in their trivial pursuit of earthly gain, worldly lusts and hedonistic pleasure.

And it’s not just Satanic or outward worldly influences bombarding us from without. It’s also the inward influences of the FLESH trying to persuade us from within! You’ve wrestled with them.

You know what I mean: Urges, and passions, and desires of the flesh, that war against the Fruit of Righteousness that the Spirit of God is trying to produce in us. Even though God’s regenerating grace has broken the enslaving hold or dominion sin had over us, it did not eradicate sin from within. The remnants of sin are still very much alive within us, and they try their hardest to lure us away from God and into sin.

And that’s why we need spiritual friends so badly. Because in the spiritual life we are opposed by the WORLD, the FLESH and the DEVIL. And because that is true, we need the support, encouragement, accountability, and strength friends offer as we fight the good fight!

Think of it in terms of something as simple as jogging. Last week I mentioned to Nancy that I’m looking forward to running on a regular basis with Dr. Paul. Not just because he’s a nice guy, but because I can always think of a 1000 reasons to put off running when it’s only me—I didn’t get enough sleep; I’m not feeling good; I’ve got a million things to do, etc., etc., etc.

But if I have someone I’ve committed to run with, it has a way of giving me that little extra motivation I need to make sure I do—because there’s now an accountability. I’m not just doing it for myself anymore. There’s an inter-dependence that makes me more determined to get out and do it even when it’s rainy, or hot, or I’m tired, and I’d like to give up.

Cicero once wrote that a friend, “though he be weak, yet his friends strength becomes his own.”

And likewise, Aristotle once wrote: “Friendship helps keep the young from error, aides older people by ministering to their needs and supplementing the activities that are failing from weakness. And it stimulates those in the prime of life to noble actions...for with friends men are more able to think and act aright.”

When was the church of Jesus Christ the healthiest? In Acts Chapter 2, when they devoted themselves to the Apostle’s teaching, and to the fellowship (that is to each other), and to the breaking of bread and to prayer—together—sharing everything they had, and eating in each other’s homes with glad and sincere hearts!

You see, they knew what we sometimes forget—that in a fallen world, we need the strength and comfort and support of devout spiritual friends who by their friendship keep us from falling, or help us back up once we have.

Friends can sustain us when the storms of life hit without notice, and we are subjected to numerous and prolonged afflictions that drive us to despair—when were ready to give up on God, or give in to the temptations of the world.

As Job says, “For the despairing man there should be kindness from his friend, SO THAT he does not forsake the fear of the Almighty.”

Then **SECONDLY**, we can ask: “WHAT do we need from our friends?” And again, Job tells us. Depending on the version you’re reading, Job says the despairing person needs: the “devotion” of his friends (NIV, NEB); or the “kindness” of his friends (NASB, ESV); or the “loyalty” of his friends (GNB).

In fact, some versions actually translate verse 14 this way: “He who withholds kindness from a friend, forsakes the fear of the Almighty.” That is, by refusing to be a friend to the despairing, or being what we could call a “fair weather friend,” we evidence the fact that we (and not the despairing person) have lost or forsaken the fear of God!

But either way, the message is the same. We owe our friends our spiritual friendship. And to refuse to give it to them when they need it, is not only to deprive them of the thing that may keep them from forsaking the fear of God, but even worse, it is to display that we ourselves have lost the fear of God.

Actually (in the Hebrew) the thing Job says we owe our spiritually struggling friends is **HESED**.

It's the most exalted word for love in the Hebrew language, because it was associated with God's covenant promise to Israel, and because it was, it has come to be called "covenant love," or "ever-lasting love."

HESED is committed love (likened in the Bible to the love a bride or groom has for each other—for better or worse type love, in sickness or health type love, till death due us part type love). It is faithful love; undying devotion; or ever-lasting friendship. It is kind, loyal, never give up type love.

HESED is the love Ruth pledged to Naomi when she said "wherever you go I will go, and wherever you stay I will stay; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried as well. May the Lord deal with me ever so severely if anything but death separates me from you." To love with *Hesed* is to love like God loves.

"A despairing man," says Job, "should have the **"HESED"** of his friends, even if he forsakes the fear of the Almighty; or so that he might not forsake the fear of the Almighty."

In this sense I have to disagree with Saint Thomas Aquinas who wrote this:

"When our friends fall into sin, we ought not to deny them the benefits of friendship—so long as there is hope of their mending their ways—and we ought to help them more readily to regain virtue than to recover money, had they lost it, since virtue is more akin than money to friendship. When, however, they fall into very great wickedness, and become incurable, we ought no longer to show them friendliness."

He would have done well to heed the words of another, who said:

*"That friendship will not continue to the end,
which began with a certain end in mind."*

Conditional friendships don't usually last. In fact, it's questionable whether "conditional friendships" are even friendships at all! Because if you're in the relationship only for what you can get out of it, then when you perceive that thing to be lacking, or not forthcoming in the near future, you'll give up on that person and move on to someone else whom you believe CAN provide it for you, or provide it better and faster than your present acquaintance.

And generally speaking—despairing, struggling, hurting, and grieving people are able to provide very little (if anything at all). Their condition makes them spiritually needy, and spiritually needy people need to receive, because they have very little ability to give. It's hard to give spiritual refreshment to others when your own well is bone dry!

And Job WISHES his friends would understand that! At this point in his life he needs THEM to minister to him, and NOT expect anything from him in return. At other times, he would have had an obligation to minister to them as well. But right now, what he needs is simply for them to love him, and stick by him, and let him draw strength from their friendship.

In fact, what he needs is for them to let him vent all his frustrations, and doubts, and despair, and disillusionment, in their presence, without being judged for it; without being preached to, or given advice, or verbally chastised, or rebuked for sharing it.

Joseph Bayly (a devout Christian man) wrote these words after he had the unfortunate experience of having to bury his three sons:

"I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God's dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly, he said things I knew were true. I was unmoved except to wish he'd go away, and he finally did. Another came and sat beside me. He just sat beside me for an hour and more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply and left. I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go."

You see, people in pain need LISTENERS, not ADVISORS or worse yet people who just waiting to critique what they say! They need someone they can bare their soul to AS IT REALLY IS!

They need someone who will let them say exactly what they're thinking & feeling—without having to edit it, censor it, or hold back some of the sorted details. Because as I've mentioned before, what they NEED is to merely get the poison out of their system—and having to censor it on the way out—for fear of being judged for impropriety if they don't—means having to leave some of that poison inside, thus thwarting the healing process!

Despairing people need someone who'll simply let them get it all out! In fact, pardon my crudeness, but I once told a friend, after he let me bare my soul to him: "Thanks for letting me vomit on you. (verbally) I just needed to get it out." We need to be ready to offer others that same courtesy when they go through tough, tough times.

In verse 25 Job says: "How painful are HONEST words!" And what he means is this: How painful honest words are to the religious type person, who would rather have us say something untrue and yet pious sounding, than true and precise, yet irreverent!

That's why Job can say in verse 26, "They treat the words of a despairing man as wind." That is, they treat his words as nothing; having no substance. They refuse to take them seriously, or put any weight in what he has to say. They don't want to hear honest words. It's too painful for them. So they ignore them or treat them like the wind. Which means Job may as well be speaking to NO ONE, as to share his honest struggles with these three "friends."

Yet the problem, at least for Job's friends, is that he refuses to LIE (v. 28). He refuses to lie simply to look spiritually healthy on the OUTSIDE (for appearances sake) when in reality he was anything but spiritually healthy on the INSIDE.

It's a point Mike Mason picks up on, and puts a different spin on. He says:

"The fact is, there is a point at which any man...gets thoroughly sick and tired of trying to put a good face on things, when the things he is facing do not have anything good about them at all. This is not sin; it is just plain honesty. It is calling a spade a spade. Job is a forthright and plainspoken man, the sort of person who is not afraid to say what is on his heart, and...we need grudgingly to acknowledge that such uncommon honesty may be one of the greatest virtues a saint can possess."

Then LAST, "How long should I befriend a person who has forsaken the fear of the Almighty?"

Or "Where do I draw the line and move on (so to speak) to invest my time and energies into more productive endeavors, or friendships with people who are more spiritually stable?"

What can I say except that everyone must, at some point, decide that for themselves. There may be times when we must simply move on. As much as it has grieved my heart, I myself have had to do that on certain occasions.

But I can say this: If we must do it, it should only be AFTER we have tried to reach out in love, over, and over, and over again! Because what despairing people need is to sense our love—even if they reject it! And they need to sense OUR love, because in many cases they are unable to sense GOD'S love, and so we, in a sense, are called to "stand in the gap" and BE the love of God to people.

Despite the fact that it was NOT TRUE, Job FELT that God had turned against him. That God must hate him. And it's easy to see why, when one considers the number and depth of the afflictions God subjected him to. Job apparently felt (like many others do) that LOVE wouldn't do, or permit, such things. And because he believed that, he felt it must be out of hatred. God had turned and become his enemy (6:4).

And because he felt that to be true, he was unable to sense God's love, making his need to sense his friend's love all the more needful—or better yet, his need to sense God's love through his friends all the more needful.

You see, that's why we should persevere as long as possible with people going through hard times. Because they are often looking to the love of God's people as tangible signs of the love God has for them. Meaning that at such times we become visible signs—incarnational manifestations—of the love God Himself has for them.

I've spoken with people in hospitals and nursing homes, who came to sense God's love for them as a result of some chaplain, or some believer coming to visit them in their darkest hour. That Christian's love spoke to the person of God's love, when they weren't quite sure of His love because of their circumstances or situation.

Jesus said we are to leave the 99 and go after the one lost or straying sheep that has left the fold. We are to go to the despairing and despondent—even the irreverent—even those who have forsaken their fear of God.

And yes, it is true—they may not return to the fold. They may continue to wander. But listen: It should never be because we gave up on them! It should be because after repeated efforts on our part to reach out to them in love, they just plain refused to accept our love, and went their own way. It should be because they rejected us, and NOT because we rejected them!

We can't make people come back, but we can let them know that WE care—and hopefully, by doing so, let them know GOD cares.

God never demands that we be successful. He merely asks us to be faithful—faithful followers of Jesus, and faithful friends to other followers of Jesus—even the ones who have, like Job, “forsaken the fear of the Almighty.”

And contra Aquinas, we are to do it NOT on the hope of future success, but simply because a despairing, struggling soul SHOULD HAVE the devotion of his friends -- even if he forsakes the fear of the Almighty.