

Who Is This Man? : The Friend
By Jason Huff
March 18, 2018
Exodus 33:7-11; James 2:20-23; John 15:1-17

Our final Scripture today is John 15:1-17. May God bless the reading of His sacred and inspired Word. “Jesus said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. 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. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other.””

I have 708 friends. Don't believe me? Just ask Facebook. In fact, if you have 500 Facebook friends, you're in the top 15% of all Facebook users. There's only one problem. Facebook has changed the meaning of the word “friend.” As far as Facebook goes, a “friend” is anyone willing to be connected to you. They don't have to have met you in real life. They could be your first grade buddy who moved in second grade that you haven't seen in forty years. It could be your neighbor; could be your neighbor's dog. I like being able to connect with other people on Facebook, but I hate that it's downgraded the meaning of the word “friend.”

Science has shown we really don't have tons of friends after all. Anthropologists have learned we can only keep up about 150 actual friendships. That's why you can be in a big church and never feel connected – you never get into the inner circle. Truth be told, though, it can be a problem for smaller churches too if we don't open ourselves up to new friendships. We don't need a ton of friendships; we just need real and true ones.

That's the issue: we have a friend problem, particularly among men. Social isolation is more of a factor on mortality than eating right or working out – the less connected you are, the shorter you live. But in English speaking countries, a majority of men have only one close friend, or none at all. We have plenty of contacts, but no one we can share a deep concern or problem with. When you look at patterns of violence, most occur with people who have a very limited or very troubled set of friends and people they can count on.

One of the awesome things about God is that God desires to be our friend. At the very beginning, God knew it was not good for man to be alone, which is why God created woman. He made us for relationships. And while we've talked about many roles of Jesus over the past several weeks, one we often forget is that He came to be our friend. God wants to call us not only His children and His people but His friends.

When Adam and Eve disobey God and their eyes are opened to good and evil, they hide from God. But when they do, this is what it says: "Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day." That means it was a normal occurrence; they recognized the sound of God's footsteps. God, perhaps in some pre-incarnation form of Jesus, regularly came to be with them, to live with them, to watch over them.

Now God didn't create us because He was lonely – far from it. The Trinity is eternal. God has eternally existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in a perfect and loving relationship one to another. He is complete and whole in and of Himself. But He desires relationship with us. Think about God walking through the garden. For lack of a better phrase, God "hung out" with Adam and Eve. He wanted to be near them. He made them to relate to Him and one another.

But a gigantic problem happens with Adam and Eve's sin. God is gracious and merciful; Adam and Eve don't die immediately, which is what they were told would happen if they ate of the tree. But God is also holy. He is beyond our imagining. He is so overwhelming that the most righteous people are terrified to have a vision of His presence.

Sinful, fallen people who appear in the presence of God without their sins being covered die. It's that simple. They cannot behold the fullness of His glory and live. When Isaiah has a vision of God, his first thought is not awe but "woe is me – I am ruined!" God cleanses Isaiah of sin; that's how he can be in His presence. Because in our humanness, we have no concept of the immensity, authority, power, glory, and uniqueness of God and what it could do to us.

God calls Abraham friend because of his obedience, and God somehow speaks to Moses face to face. (Most Christian scholars throughout the centuries again believe that this was some form of Jesus appearing.) God forges a close relationship with a few people in the Old Testament era. But even then, they can't behold the fullness of His glory.

Moses asks to see God's glory, and God puts him in the cleft of a rock and passes by in such a way that Moses can only see Him from the back; he cannot see God's face. This is the holiest man of the Jewish faith, and he cannot see God's face and live. The radiant glory of God on Moses' face, the glory that stayed with Moses, it was so intense that the Israelites begged him to cover His face until it went away. Even the "sunburn" of God's glory, a reflection of the reflected glory of God, twice removed, is enough to strike fear.

But when we read the law of God in the first five books of the Bible, we often miss the most important part of what they tell us. We get bored. I just finished reading Leviticus, and it's not an exciting book. We get exact details of how the tabernacle should look. We get minutiae on all sorts of sacrifices that are to be made, and how, and when, and what they're for. Some of it just doesn't seem to be relevant to us.

But the law becomes fascinating when you recognize the key to it: God wants to be in relationship with His people. God gave us the law so that His wayward, disobedient people would know what pleased Him and how to approach Him despite their sin. God warned of miseries that would occur if they threw Him out of their lives through their sin, but He also promised blessings if they would look to Him and walk with Him. The law showed how a relationship with God could be possible. The sacrifices made it possible for the sins of God's people to be covered so that they could come to Him without fear.

As the years went on, though, God's people wanted less and less to do with Him. Some ignored Him. But others thought the sacrificial system allowed them to do whatever they wanted. They worshipped other gods, allied with foreign powers, dealt wickedly with each other, and then came to the feasts and festivals with their sacrifices thinking they would be OK with God. Imagine a cheating husband coming home each week with flowers. The flowers are nice, but the only way to repair the relationship is not with tokens and gifts but to stop cheating.

It got to the point where God said through the prophet Amos, "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. I won't accept all your offerings; take away the noise of your songs. Instead, let justice roll like a river and righteousness like a neverending stream!" Through Isaiah, God argued that when the Israelites fasted, supposedly to get closer to Him, they did what they wanted, exploited their workers, and fought with each other. God said an acceptable fast was one where justice was given to the oppressed, where the hungry are fed and the wanderer given shelter and the naked clothed.

God loved this people, but they refused Him. Yet He made us for relationship with Him both now and forever. So the Father sends the Son as the ultimate means of reconciliation between God and mankind. Through the Son, God ends the old sacrificial system that only covered up sins rather than dealing with them permanently. There's a lot to be said about that, which we'll talk about next week. But the reason behind Jesus' sacrifice for our sins is that God still wants that deep bond with us.

That's why Jesus came as a friend. That might sound funny because Jesus does all sorts of amazing and incredible things; the disciples are shocked and amazed and occasionally scared by Jesus. He teaches with authority; He commands the wind and waves; He speaks and diseases and death flee. He is fiercely intimidating to those who believe that they are just fine, thank you very much. But the gospels show us a thoughtful man who was indeed a friend.

We know it's true because Jesus' enemies complained about His friendships. In Luke 7:34, Jesus is accused by the Pharisees of being "a friend of tax collectors and sinners." They didn't like that Jesus was chummy with the "wrong sort of people." Jesus replies to them that the healthy don't need a doctor, but the sick do. The tax collectors and sinners, they knew who they were, they knew they needed God's intervention, they knew they needed grace. So Jesus hung out with them. Really, He hung out with anyone who would welcome Him.

Jesus was a friend to those in trouble – the sick, the poor, the dying. Jesus had great compassion on the crowds because they were like sheep without a shepherd. He bantered with people and often brought out their faith by His discussions with them. Whether it's the woman at the well, the centurion who trusts Jesus to heal His servant, the Canaanite woman with a possessed daughter, or even Nicodemus the scaredy-cat Pharisee who'll only meet with Him at night, Jesus turns phrases, appreciates witty replies, and steers His way through conversations to get at the heart of the matter – just like a friend would.

But Jesus also made close friends during His time on Earth. Three disciples in particular – John, James, and Peter – were invited with Jesus on special events, like His transfiguration. They got a special glimpse of His glory. Then there's Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. When Jesus went to the village of Bethany, He stayed with them. They are among the very few people about whom Scripture states, "Jesus loved them." Lazarus is the only individual Jesus personally names as friend. It's no surprise that Jesus raises His friend from the dead.

Near the end of His earthly life, Jesus explained that the primary identity of the apostles is not servants or students but friends. They know everything of the Father's plan. He has chosen them as friends; it wasn't their choice, but His choice. His intention is for them to bear fruit – to not only spread His message but to show the results of His message in their lives.

Here's the thing: Jesus died so that everyone throughout history who believes in Him would not only be His Kingdom, not only avoid hell, not only be His people, but be His friends, friends of God. Jesus died to remove the unholiness of our sin. Jesus' death removes our inability to stand in the presence of a holy God. When we are counted as Jesus' friends, God sees us wearing His righteousness, and He perfects us so we can be near Him without fear.

Being a friend of Jesus means that no matter what happens in this life, you need not fear the future. The Father will give you whatever you need; Jesus promises that the faithful can ask anything in His name and the Father will give it. Jesus knows the faithful pay attention to His teachings; we aren't asking for great cars or the good life but that our friends might become Jesus' friends, that we might grow in spiritual graces like kindness, gentleness, and self-control. And God will grant them. Being Jesus' friend means you can turn to Him with anything. He has lived this life. He understands how hard it is. When no one on earth is there for you, He is. And He gives us the church so that we can know other friends who we can count on in His name.

Here's the important thing to remember, though: it isn't about whether or not you call Jesus friend, but whether or not Jesus calls you friend. In Luke 13, Jesus tells a parable about Himself at the end of time where a lot of people say, "We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets." But He will answer, "I don't know you or where you come from." In Matthew 7, a different variation has some people who prophecy in Jesus' name and do miracles, even casting out demons in His name, thrown out because they are evildoers. Knowing who God is isn't enough. James the brother of Jesus writes, "You believe in God. Great! Even the demons believe in God."

Think of it this way: the rapper Eminem lives in Rochester Hills. Famous around the country. His daughter went to Chippewa Valley High School and graduated in 2014. I'm sure plenty of local youth "know" Eminem. They can quote every lyric Eminem has ever written. They have every album, bought every tour T-shirt, have every poster, watched every interview. But when they pull up to the gate outside Eminem's mansion and say, "I'm here to hang out with Eminem," you know what security's going to do, right? Turn them right back around and send them home. Because they know all about him, but they don't know him.

In the same way, we can read the Bible, we can say, "I love Jesus," we can put crosses up in our homes and put bumper stickers on our cars, and yet be no more than fans of Jesus. When your time comes, you do not want to be a fan of Jesus. You want Him to know you as His friend. So how does that happen?

First, it requires faith. Faith saves us. But that faith has content. It's not just believing in your mind that Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead as a yes or no; yes He did or no He didn't. It's believing that truth strongly enough that it changes the course of our lives and who we are and who we become. You want to be Jesus' friend? He actually makes it really simple.

You are my friend if you do what I command, Jesus said. What does He command? Two things, simple to remember, harder to do, but not impossible when the Holy Spirit lives in you through faith. First, abide in Him. Abiding simply means remaining, not running off somewhere else, staying, sticking around. It means you make Him first in your life; He is your priority. And this isn't surprising, because we all know this about friendship.

Friendship requires regular interaction. You lose the interaction, eventually you lose the friendship. We all have a few people that we pick right back up with after a few years, but even then, they aren't friends we count on and rely on on a regular basis. They become acquaintances we have a lot of history with. A friendship needs time and regularity. Same thing with Jesus. Pick up the Bible regularly. Pray every day. Spend a few minutes with Him. We need that time. That cultivates friendship.

And the second part can happen when you abide in Jesus: *love one another as He has loved you*. Loving one another despite all our faults can be tough. It takes time, effort, money. It can only happen if we remain in Jesus because He provides us the strength and courage it takes to do it. But it can happen. Jesus gives us many teachings about how to love one another – caring for the poor, helping the needy, nursing the sick, standing up for justice, showing kindness to the stranger, loving our enemies. Not easy. But when you know that Jesus loved you enough to die for you, when you are abiding in Him, it comes easier.

Friendship with Jesus makes loving one another easier because being someone's friend makes us interested in the things that interest them. Because of my friends, I've watched shows, listened to music, gone to ball games, things I wouldn't have done except that they interested them. In our sinful state, loving others is far from our minds. But when Jesus knows us as friends, His goodness, His mercy, His holiness rubs off on us. We find ourselves living in His ways because true friends become like one another. In becoming human, Jesus humbled Himself and became like us in every way except sin. When things are hard, you know He has been there.

If you aren't sure you are a friend of Jesus, ask Him today to count you among His friends and ask Him to show you His ways. And if you are, rejoice! You have a friend for all eternity, One who has made you a home in heaven and prepared you a place in the glorious Kingdom of our Heavenly Father.