True Friends

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Proverbs 17:17 A friend loves at all times and kinsfolk are born to share adversity.

God is constantly seeking ways to touch our hearts; communicate to our souls and affect the way we think, believe, act, and speak. We are born into a physical family, and part of our life journey is the education we gain from interacting with our parents and in some cases siblings. God attempts to contact us through every family member through their unique personalities. God will use our spouse as a channel for teaching us, and drawing us more directly toward Spirit as we learn the lessons of marriage and intimate relationships. God will communicate with us through relationships with our pets.

And one of the most important ways that God communicates with us is through our friendships. Family brings us certain lessons, as do our spouses, as do the strangers we meet, and the pets that we have. But friends bring something to us that we need: an honest, trustworthy, accepting attitude.

In truth, I don’t have a lot of friends. It makes me wonder about myself. There are many people in my life that I like and enjoy being with, but the guy that I’m drawn to share my heart and secrets with just hasn’t come around that often. I think partly it is because I have a fantastic friendship with Mary. She knows me and I am comfortable with her. We started off our relationship as friends and I am blessed for that.

Another reason I don’t have a lot of friends is that I have a hard time trusting someone not to hurt me. Early on, I had some experiences with people who I thought were friends, but they seemed to have an ulterior motive in wanting to get to know me. The Bible says it this way in Proverbs 18:24 -- *Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin*.

Fortunately, not many but a couple of people have just played at being my friend: as soon as I do something or say something contrary to their ways, they kind of just go away. After a couple of times of this, I grew jaded and more conservative in whom I let get close. Perhaps this was wisdom.

And it just may be part of my personality type: I’m more socially awkward and uncomfortable to begin with, so letting people in has always been hard for me.

I have never been one who feels like I need lots of people around me. I’m pretty comfortable in my own skin, and I feel fulfilled with Mary.

Proverbs 12:26 says: *The righteous should choose his friends carefully, For the way of the wicked leads them astray*. I agree with this. My Dad once told me that one of the most important jobs a parent has is to pick their children’s friends. If we are a parent, I think that sentiment strikes pretty close to home. We all want the best for our children. We want them to grow up healthy and safe, with strong character, and a good sense of right and wrong. We might try to establish our standards and fill their minds and hearts with what we think is best, but a few days with the wrong crowd and all of that is out the window.

1 Corinthians 15:33 *Don't be deceived, bad company corrupts good character*. Children don’t really know much when they are young; they have no life experience. They don’t know what behaviors are appropriate, so as a parent we try to lead them toward people who we believe might be more aligned with the way we think. Now, we could be way off in our discernments, but we try to guide our children.

Did you ever stop to think that God does the same thing with us? Our intuition continually tells us about the people we associate with. When we are attuned to God, we are repelled by some people and instantly attracted to others – even someone we have met for just the first time. One of my favorite spiritual teachers, Paramahansa Yogananda says that this is the soul’s response to meeting a friend from a former life. Now we may not believe in reincarnation, but that explanation makes me smile; the possibility that we are again meeting a friend that we’ve had before … that just seems pretty cool to me.

I want to mention something, and I could very well be wrong, but I am going to give this advice anyway. Ladies, do not spend a great deal of personal, casual alone time around married men. It’s not that men can’t be trusted; it is just that there is so much testosterone flowing through our bodies. Those of us that are in solid relationships are freer from the temptation. We love our wives and believe we are beyond the enticements of the human condition. We also know enough not to put ourselves in those situations.

Then there are those marriages that may seem strong, but are actually just hanging on by a thread. In those cases, the temptation of a woman’s attention may be more than can be endured.

Now men, let me give you the same advice. It’s not a physical attraction always with women, although it can be, but more frequently they may be craving the attention and warmth missing from a weak relationship. If we start spending personal alone time with a married woman, without realizing it we could become an agent in the dissolution of that marriage.

Oh Patrick, you are so off-base. We are adults; we are mature individuals capable of controlling our emotions and behaviors.

Perhaps I am off-base, and maybe I don’t know what I’m talking about, and absolutely it is none of my business. But Matthew 26:41 says this: *Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak*.” Our spirititual natures may be mature and strong, but there are times when the ego and our human, earthly natures can get the better of us.

But hey … life is about lessons. Perhaps there is an education to be had from a challenging marriage. Maybe we have to be less lazy. We need to continue to improve, advance, learn, and grow as an individual. We need to work more on ourselves than on our spouses. Marriage does not make us whole; marriage does not make us happy. We do that on our own; that is our responsibility.

We can’t be lazy about admitting our part in the challenge, taking ownership and not blaming the other, but instead looking for solutions, pursuing counseling, and taking the steps to make the marriage better.

We can’t be lazy about communicating our feelings, thoughts, and desires in a loving, nonjudgmental, unoffending manner. We have to put the effort into talking to each other and listening to each other. We can’t get lazy with our communication skills. Without communication, unrealistic expectations can create problems.

Of course, we **could** choose to be lazy. We could always take the attitude, “If God wants this marriage to work then we will stay together,” and we continue being the same old grumpy, inconsiderate, unproductive victim we always have been. We could always think, “Maybe God is dissolving this marriage because they are not for me.”

Maybe … or maybe we are just being lazy. It is easy to avoid an issue; it is difficult to face it with love and even mindedness. In any case, throughout it all it is our obligation to our spouse and to God to do the best we can, give it all we have, seek solutions, be open to the Christ and then let God do the rest.

All of these thoughts are applicable to our friends, as well. In an ideal marriage or life relationship, our spouse – our partner - is also our friend. As in a marriage, our friendships demand our highest responsibility in terms of trust, confidentiality, and acceptance. If someone trusts me enough to bare their soul, speak privately to me and share information of an intimate personal nature, they do not have to say, “Please, don’t share this with anyone.”

In fact, when someone shares pretty much anything with me, I don’t speak of it unless I am specifically asked to. We can’t be lazy with friends; we can’t be lazy with our relationships. They require our utmost attention and integrity.

Occasionally a friend will share something that hurts; it stings – sometimes out of ignorance, but maybe because it is true and we have been hiding from that truth. It hurts to know that what we have worked so hard to hide was so obvious to someone who really knew us and cared about us.

Proverbs 27:6 gives us this insight: *Wounds from a friend are received as well-meant, but an enemy's kisses are insincere*. It may be easier to only listen to the good things we are being told, but much of that is not instructive; it doesn’t help us grow and develop, which is what God wants for us. The honest love and input from a friend can do more to put us back on track than the sweet insincerities of unconcerned and less loyal individuals.

Now, having said that, do not think it’s a great idea to critique your friends and loved ones with scalding criticism and justify it by saying you are only being truthful. “I love you Patrick, but you look dopey; your singing gets worse and worse every week, and your talks are trite useless blather.”

See, I wouldn’t consider this person a friend. Would you? Would you want this person in your “inner circle”? Would you trust this person as someone with whom you could bare your heart and soul and most inner personal thoughts? I don’t think so.

But when the time is right, a person will come into our life … a friend. A relationship may grow from someone we currently know or it may suddenly just happen. Spirit will speak to us through this person. They will lift us when we fall. They will share their umbrella when it rains. They will loan us their truck, mend our fence; they will share their hearts with us and need our help, and they will be there when we need help. And we will be grateful.

[Ask to congregation to share their thoughts on friendship.]

I pray that we will simply open our hearts to the Christ so that we may recognize those who are our friends, and I pray that we open our hearts so that we can be a friend.

Let us pray….