

Face to Face

MEDITATIONS ON
FRIENDSHIP AND HOSPITALITY

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Preface

I'm thankful for the opportunity to add a brief preface to the second edition of this book. (Well, really, I'm most thankful that it's had to have another printing!) There are a number of men whom I need to thank and something I want to say regarding the perspective of the book as a whole.

The book is the product of a series of sermons preached in 1999. It was originally published in 2002, about the time that I was beginning to see the wondrous implications of the biblical doctrine of the Trinity through the work of Peter Leithart, Jeff Meyers, and Ralph Smith (especially Ralph's books *Trinity and Reality*, *Paradox and Truth*, and *The Eternal Covenant*). For me, the work of these men (and others as well) was instrumental in bringing about one of those "eureka" moments that God grants us from time to time. This means that there is a great deal that I wish I had said but didn't, and a good bit that I would probably say a bit differently if I were to write the book again today. In particular, I wish that I had made more of all the insights on the Trinity that my friends have since taught me. I do mention the Trinity, but I don't draw out the implications as fully as I should have (and would have, if I had known better). So, given that I'm not going to rewrite the book, let me say a few things to set it more securely in the Trinitarian context from which it grew (though largely unawares).

Friendship and hospitality are vital for life simply and fundamentally because God is a Triune being. He is not a solitary monad (e.g., Allah), but Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. John reminds us God *is* love—not that God *loves*, but that *love is fundamental* to God’s very being. This can only be true because God is Triune. As a Triune being, God has always existed in a communion of love, joy, and fellowship. The Father has eternally loved the Son and given Himself for Him; the Son has always loved the Father and given up Himself for Him; and the Spirit has always been the bond of love between the Father and the Son and ever lives to exalt both.

Man, being created after the image of God cannot help but be a social being—one who finds his true humanity in society and fellowship and communion with others. Man, like God, is fundamentally a relational being.

This helps us to understand the disaster sin wrought by its entrance into the world through Adam’s disobedience. Sin isolates. Sin causes man to focus upon himself, love himself, and serve himself—i.e., become thoroughly inhuman. Sin causes “death” (isolation from God and man). We see it right away in the Garden. Adam blames Eve for his failure and is apparently willing for Eve to perish in God’s wrath (“The woman that You gave me, she gave me of the fruit . . .”). Pretty callous. Amazingly indifferent to the one whom moments before he referred to as “bone of his bone.” But that’s what sin does to us.

This also helps us understand the whole business of salvation. Salvation is deliverance from the death and isolation of sin. Salvation brings us back into the life, love, and communion of the Triune God. It is, in the fullest sense, *life*. Life is restoration to communion, or perhaps better, restoration into the life of the Triune community (thus, we are baptized “*into the name* of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”). Salvation involves a restoration of the image of God in us. Salvation makes us like God again—and that means that salvation is inescapably social. It doesn’t happen in isolation from others. God works through others to bring us to Himself and to restore His image in us.

It is interesting that the image God uses to describe the Church is not a solitary mountain retreat or a quiet, orderly monastery. Rather, He likens it to a bustling, thriving, vibrant city—with emissaries from the nations coming and going, bringing gifts, seeking assistance, rejoicing in the glorious love and the infinite life and light of God Himself (Rev. 21–22). The focus is not upon a deliverance worked out as a private matter between God and the isolated individual. Rather, God brings the individual out of his isolation into the deliverance that has been worked for His people, the new Israel.

The goal of the work of redemption is the preparation of a Bride for the Son—and that Bride is the Church, the body of Christ. It is in the Church that one finds the Spirit dwelling in His fullness, hears the word of God plainly spoken, and enjoys the life of God as manifested in and through the other members of the family (the citizens of the heavenly city). And it is through communion with the other members of the body that each individual is nourished and built up to maturity in Christ Jesus (Eph. 4:15–16).

The unhealthy overemphasis on “the individual” that we find in modern American evangelicalism has seriously undermined the way we understand salvation. We have reduced salvation to “going to heaven when you die.” We think of the Church as a nice, sometimes helpful organization where one can perhaps receive encouragement and comfort in times of need. But for far too many of us, “salvation” is something that is received, worked out, and experienced, solely within ourselves, apart from others.

God, however, sees salvation more along the lines of bringing you out of the darkness and isolation of sin and into the glorious hubbub and life of the Church. Salvation is incorporation into Christ. It involves being united by the Spirit to His body. It means not only having an individual relationship with God through His Son by the power of His Spirit, but enjoying and experiencing this relationship through vital communion with God *through* His people.

Sin cut you off from God, put you under His curse, and cut you off from others. Sin isolates. Salvation brings you into God's city, the Jerusalem that comes down from above (Rev. 21:2-3, 9-11) and thrusts you into the midst of all the rowdiness of life that is found there.

The center of this life is worship. As we commune together in worship, we learn what life is and how we must live together. Life consists of confessing our sins (to God and to one another); hearing and believing His Word (in worship and through the week as we speak to one another); eating together (at the Lord's table and at our family tables); going forth together into the world in obedience and service with the assurance of God's blessing and love. Friendship and hospitality begin in the city and, like the river of the water of life that flows out of the gates of the new Jerusalem, they flow forth to the world, transforming it from a wilderness into the garden of the Lord.

This reality is the foundation of everything said in this book. Why do you need friends? Why must you exercise hospitality? So that you can be like God. So that you can share in the life of God, the new life that is in Christ Jesus. This life doesn't come in isolation from others but only in vital, sacrificial, loving communion with others (Eph. 4:16).

Thanks again to all my teachers and friends from whom I've learned everything you will read here. And thanks to all at Canon Press for their kindness, patience, and invaluable assistance.

Part One

Friendship

CHAPTER 1

Its Necessity and Obligations

The clearest evidence that we live in a degenerate culture is the fact that we practice so little genuine biblical friendship; even the word *friend* itself has become a hollow term, drained of its biblical content and weight. This is precisely what we should expect as the influence of God's covenant wanes in a culture—the culture gradually becomes more brutal and more barbaric, and true friends become hard to find. In the fourth chapter of Ecclesiastes, Solomon laments for the oppressed, because they cry out and there is no one to comfort them. Here is a lonely barbarity, without comfort or companion. Contemporary culture is like those oppressed people, a slave to sin and with no friend to turn to. Society and community begin to die out, because sin isolates men from one another. Sin by its very nature is a proud, selfish insistence on going one's own way, and as such it cuts a man off from everyone around him. Whenever a society tolerates sin and covenant-breaking, loneliness becomes a common problem within that society, and its citizens begin to think of true friends as a luxury, not as a necessity.

This is the view which most people hold today, whether they have actually formulated the idea in their minds or not. They are not opposed to friendship, but they do not believe that it is essential to their lives, especially when it is so difficult to make and keep a true friend. We are told from all

sides, “You don’t need friends. You need no one else besides yourself. You must be your own best friend. You cannot trust other people.” Many people now live this way; the solution to friendlessness is to pretend that you don’t need friends at all. The folly of mankind has never been more plain: encouraging the very selfishness and self-centeredness that destroys true friendship, and then complaining of loneliness. The very thing they focus on—that is, themselves—prevents them from having true friends. As you can imagine, in a climate like this true friendship becomes nearly impossible.

Even God’s people are not immune to this mentality. They fall into the trap of thinking that holy friendship, while it may be a nice thing to have, is really not possible. They have been disappointed in friendship so often that they have given up the hope of ever having true friends. But we simply must face up to the reality that disappointments in this area are to be expected. They are to be expected, first, because all men are sinners. No one is perfect, and an imperfect person will inevitably disappoint those around him from time to time. We should expect this even more as we consider the culture in which we have been reared. The nature of the world itself, the lack of community in our age, and the fact that we have been brought up in a world that is so barren of godly friendship, all mean that we are crippled to some degree in understanding what it means, what its demands are, and how to obtain it.

Of course, in a faithful covenant culture, children would learn these things without much formal teaching. They would learn them daily, living in a faithful society and family, constantly interacting with people of integrity. But when children grow up in a culture that is unfriendly—in the true sense of the word—they grow up without the skills they need to build and maintain biblical friendships and relationships. To a greater or lesser degree, this has been the experience of most of us. A few have grown up in very fine families where they have learned many of these skills and abilities, and know them almost instinctively. Unfortunately, most have not had this privilege.

Today, more and more people are growing up in abnormal families and hostile environments and consequently do not understand the basics of friendship *at all*. Therefore we must seek to understand what the Bible teaches about this most basic subject, a subject that in other ages would have been frivolous to study. Two hundred years ago, it would have seemed a waste of sermon-time to preach entire messages on godly friendship, friendliness, and relationships. It is not a waste of time for the contemporary church. We must give this issue the careful thought it deserves.

The Grace of Friendship

Rather than implying that friends are a luxury, the Bible declares the opposite, as we'll see. Friends are not a luxury but a necessity. They are not optional but vital. God, in His mercy, does not save us in isolation from other people but rather in community with other people. If we are to be all that God commands us to be, we must realize that having godly relationships with friends is vital to the whole process.

This is more obvious to some than others. Those who have children recognize that their children need to know these things and develop these skills. But the obligation does not stop with childhood or youth. It is essential for all of us who are still living, whether we are in middle age or old age. Although we may have learned these skills already, the importance of godly friends and godly relationships, and the duties and obligations they involve, remain with us as long as we live.

Scripture says that God (in grace) places the solitary in families (Ps. 68:6). The meaning of this promise is not merely physical, although generally we, as individuals, do grow up in families, and move on to start families of our own. This is a true and glorious part of the promise, but it is not entirely, or perhaps even primarily, what God is speaking of in this context. He is talking about His grace. God comes to the rebel who has isolated himself in his rebellion (we are not

created solitary), and God takes him up and puts him in a society, a family, and a community—the covenant family of the righteous. That is the principal meaning of the verse. The church, as the great covenant family, is the example of true community and thus is the pattern for all human communities in the world. It is also the example of the true family, from which all other families learn how to live. We learn how to live in our families by living within the Family of God and being taught by it. The church becomes the center of all society, because God founded church for that purpose—to teach and build up the people, so that we might live faithfully in all other areas of life.

For this reason I want to consider the nature and necessity of biblical friendship, and to do this we must ask a number of questions. Why must we have friends? What kind of friends ought we to have? What does it mean to be friendly? How is a friendship maintained and cultivated, and what will destroy a friendship?

Necessary by Creation

Humans are created as social beings, for they are created after the image of God. There is a wealth of knowledge in that single statement: “Let Us make man in Our image” (Gen. 1:26). God is not solitary; he is a triune personality. He is three as well as one, and the holy communion that is enjoyed by the three persons of the Trinity is the pattern for all earthly communion. We are so constituted by God as to live in the society of others. It is a nonnegotiable and undeniable attribute of humanity.

This was true of Adam prior to the fall. Adam was a perfect man created by the wisdom of God. He was everything that the infinite wisdom of God could make him. But God said, “It is not good that man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18). The man needed a companion; he needed someone who would be his friend. He could not live faithfully without a faithful companion. For this reason God created a woman, so that

Adam would no longer be alone, and because of this God was able to pronounce mankind as “good.” Adam would not have been all that God intended him to be if he had lived in isolation. He would not have been able to fully glorify God.

Thus the need for society is not something imposed on us because of our sinfulness and weakness. We are weak people, and weakness is one reason that we need friends, but it is not the first or most important reason. We were made for society from the very beginning. Specifically, human beings were made for the society of marriage. Unless a man has been given the gift of celibacy, it is not just a privilege to be married—it is a divine obligation. Men are commanded to seek a wife and should take it as seriously as any other command that God has given. They are to be active rather than passive in this regard because of their creation. Unless God has given him the gift of celibacy, so that he can be happy in the society of the church and the family of God without a companion, then it is not good for a man to be alone.

Our social behavior is something very natural and instinctive. This is why you feel uncomfortable if you ever run across one of those people who has no friends and does not care to have any, one who lives by himself and would rather not have anyone coming around. There is something wrong about this. Instinctively one feels that he is a suspicious character. He may be a fine man on his own, but the fact that he does not want to be near others or to develop intimate friendships indicates that there is something not right in his situation. In fact, while he remains in this state, he is not truly human.

We are finite beings and therefore cannot be self-sufficient. We are utterly dependent upon others, and the longer we live, the more we feel this fact. He is a fool who thinks he can live by himself. It is impossible. Nevertheless, many people are very attracted to the Romantic idea of escaping into the wilderness, living by themselves, and not depending on anyone else. It is attractive because God alone is self-sufficient, and every rebel wants to be like Him. There is something in the heart of sinful man which dislikes being indebted to anyone.

If a man is indebted, he is obligated to show his gratitude, and sinful man is not grateful. Instead, he wants everyone to be indebted to him. But God will humble and teach anyone who thinks in this way. He will teach him, one way or another, that he cannot be independent and that God alone is self-sufficient. Every man is finite and thus cannot have within himself everything necessary for his own life and prosperity. No one has all gifts, talents, and abilities necessary to sustain his life. No one has all the knowledge necessary to live and exercise dominion.

One could raise what might be called the Robinson Crusoe objection. That character survived alone and prospered, didn't he? In fact, in the story, Robinson Crusoe was not really alone at all. He was indeed shipwrecked, but what did he do? He read books—he read the Bible. In this hard providence, Scripture was company enough. He also was not living on merely his own resources, as much of his survival and comfort depended on items salvaged from the ship, relics testifying to the society of his origin. He was not self-sufficient, nor did he ever profess to be. He relied on the grace of God, humbling himself under the mighty hand of God, and was exalted in due time. He acknowledged his finiteness again and again and bewailed the loneliness and isolation which God had allotted to him.

Even if Crusoe could prosper on his own, what would become of his labor after his death? Nothing would come of it. Nothing would continue, for progress is impossible apart from mutual sharing. Ultimately, no man can reproduce himself. Man is not some sort of amoeba that can multiply by dividing. Man will die in isolation. The survival of the human race depends upon companionship, communion, and holy friendship.

Necessary by the Fall

Friendship is also necessary because of the reality of the fall. Each of us, by nature, has a fundamental flaw, a basic weakness,

which we must acknowledge. Because of sin and not just finitude we desperately need others to help us—to watch over and care for us. Solomon states the case clearly: “Two are better than one” (Eccl. 4:9) because “if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls” (Eccl. 4:10). He does not say “falls” carelessly. He is not speaking of a man tripping and falling down into a hole in the ground where no one can pull him out. He is talking about sin. Woe to the man who sins and has no one to help him. That man continues in his self-righteous pride, and there is no one to say a word to lift him out of the pit of sin into which he has fallen. Woe to the man who falls into sin. We need friends who will rebuke, correct, and admonish us when we fall.

In Hebrews, the writer warns the people of an evil heart of unbelief, which was Israel’s preeminent sin of old. He says, “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God” (Heb. 3:12). The apostle warns us to guard against unbelief, but what practical steps are we to take to do this? Will we keep ourselves safe by reading a certain book or attending a special seminar? These things may be helpful, but the apostle himself provides the inspired remedy in the next verse: “Exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any one of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (3:13). We need the exhortations of other Christians to keep us from being hardened.

We hear this point again later in Hebrews: “Let us consider one another in order to stir up to love and good works” (10:24). We need to be stirred up by others. We cannot live only under our own preaching; there are times when we need the words of others to provoke us to righteousness. And the very next verse adds: “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together” (10:25). We are not to isolate ourselves. One of the chief problems of the church is that its members live by themselves. They do not interact with other people. No one rebukes them, because no one knows them well enough to predict how they will respond to it. When the members of a church fall into this error, the whole church is in danger.

Thus we are commanded not to forsake assembling together. Each one of us must learn to be with God's people, so that we may know and have confidence in one another. Only then will we be able to give and receive exhortations against sin, and encourage each other toward godliness. Such knowledge and confidence is not optional, but necessary.

Exhortation does not always come from our own friendships. We also need the examples of others. The biographies of other saints are deeply encouraging, because in them we see powerful instances of sinners being used graciously in the plan of God. The great biographies in the Scriptures—such as Hebrews 11—are in the Bible, because God wants to remind us of these great examples, particularly that of our Savior in the gospels. This is why reading in addition to friendship is so important, whether we read the Bible or other histories. No one can be everywhere or see everything. No one can know everybody or be everybody's friend. So God in His mercy moves men to write about their friends, allowing us to get to know them as well. We need this.

Necessary by Grace

Friends are necessary because of the way that God dispenses His grace corporately. There will be no positive growth in grace apart from friends in covenant community. (Of course, God does minister to us individually by His Spirit, and in that sense we are each the temple of God.) God has ordained that His grace be dispensed through means. He normally works through the ministries of others in various ways, and thus when He saves us, He puts us in a place where we will receive that ministry from the covenant family. This relationship is defined by the church, and that is why we can say there is no salvation apart from the grace of God ministered through His people: the Word read and the Word preached by a faithful friend, the prayers of our friends on our behalf, and the gifts and the ministries of our friends to us.

In Ephesians 4:11–16, Paul writes that the elders are to teach and equip the members to minister to the whole body, so that the whole body might be built up. The worship of God in public is especially used by Him to build us up in grace, as David says in Psalm 122:1: “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go into the house of the LORD.’” David enjoyed private worship and his own devotions, but he was especially glad to hear the call for the public assembly. He longed for the time when he could gather in the holy society of the redeemed.

The sacraments demonstrate this to us again and again. Baptism emphasizes the sovereign operation of God’s Spirit as He initiates the divine friendship with God; the Lord’s Supper reminds us that our Savior became man and offered Himself as a sacrifice for us. As He reminded His disciples the night before His death, He was doing this as their friend. He says, “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you” (Jn. 15:13). The Lord’s Supper reminds us of this divine kinsman-redeemer—this divine friend—and even the elements of the Supper speak to us about the dependence that we have on God and upon our brethren. It is interesting that we use bread and wine rather than plucked wheat kernels and grapes. In order to have bread, we must take the thing that comes from God, the wheat that grows out of the ground, and then use the abilities that God has given us to grind the wheat, add the yeast and other ingredients, and it make it into a loaf of bread. Similarly, we must take the grapes, crush them, allow them to ferment, separate the liquid from the solid matter, and finally allow it to age to perfect its taste. It is no longer grape juice, but *wine*, and there is meaning in it. In this way God reminds us that, by his blessing and grace, men have had a hand in the making of the sacramental elements. Ultimately all blessing comes from God, but He uses human means to bring us to Himself and to nurture us in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

Everything around us confirms this. All of life points to the necessity of holy communion with godly friends, and

everywhere we look, isolation equals death. Physically, man in isolation will die a physical death. Covenantally, the man who rejects godly companions will perish, cut off from the people of God. This message is repeated in the Scriptures again and again. In Proverbs 29:1, Solomon describes a man who evidently has friends but refuses to listen to them. They reprove and rebuke him for his own good, but he hardens his neck against them, and for this reason he is destroyed. Proverbs 18:1 states that “A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; he rages against all wise judgment.” The isolated man does not realize what he is doing, but he is in grave danger. Again, in Proverbs 13:20, “He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed.” Without godly friends a man is destroyed.

Thus the ultimate fruition of sin—which is that ultimate expression of our selfishness, going our own way, and isolating ourselves—is the isolation of hell. Hell is described in the Bible as exactly that: it is the outer darkness where there is no communion, where one is left utterly and completely alone. This unimaginable punishment is horribly appropriate to wicked men who never wanted to listen and have holy communion with others. They rejected the covenant family. Thus God lets them go and allows them to live by themselves, having no communion with Him or with others, in torment for all eternity. It would be one degree of comfort to suffer with others, since at least there is some communion in that common suffering. But God says that hell is the place of no comfort at all. It is not the sort of place depicted in popular cartoons, where Satan herds people a little room and plays tricks on them. It is a terrible place where former men and women are isolated in the most excruciating torment that can ever be imagined, alone for all eternity with no communion.

The loneliness of such a state only has force because we were not created to live alone. In the entire history of mankind, from our creation and fall through the gradual redemption of the world, the value of friends is constant. Godly friendship is an absolute necessity because of our creation, the

consequences of the fall, and the manner of God's dispensing of His grace.

Friendliness Before Friendship

Friendliness and friendship aren't the same thing, and we have to understand their difference. Clearly the Bible teaches that we are to "love our neighbors as ourselves." Many times when the word "neighbor" is translated in the Bible, in the original language it is actually the same word for "friend." The term "neighbor" has a broad application: it may be your actual neighbor, your intimate friend, or, as the parable of the good Samaritan points out, it could be a complete stranger who has an urgent need. In other words, all men are our neighbors in the sense used in Scripture, and Jesus' parable teaches that we are obligated to be friendly to them, no matter how different they are from us. Young people especially need to practice simply being friendly. Teenagers have difficulty acting friendly, often because they just do not know how. Sometimes it is because they are prideful, wanting to make fun of or humiliate others, so that they can feel superior to them. Teenagers need to learn that this is not the way to live in the real world. It may be a good way to get one's teeth knocked out later in life, but it's not a good way to live happily with other people. It may be a good way to be lonely later in life, but it is not a good way to profit from others and be profitable to them.

General friendliness will express itself in two ways. We are first to be charitable to those with legitimate needs. We labor so that we will have the means with which to give to others. Paul says in Ephesians 4:28, "Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who is in need." We labor not merely to supply our own needs but to obtain an abundance so that we may have more to give. We should not want a salary increase to spend more for ourselves; rather, the rich man ought to see riches as a blessing because the more he has, the more he has to give, to show the grace

and generosity of God to others. That is why we ought to desire success in our labors, and why we should work for more than what we need: because there are other people who have needs. God prospers our labors and blesses our efforts for this very reason. Paul says to the Corinthians that they have been given an abundance to supply the needs of their brethren so that there may be an equality (2 Cor. 8:13–15). He is not talking about socialism and the compulsory redistribution of wealth; he is talking about the purposes of God in giving some men more than others. He says that this equality, which comes when an abundance of one group supplies the need of another, displays the righteous caring of the people of God for each other. Our differences in social and economic blessings are given so that we may show righteousness in charitable friendship.

Conversely, it is a great sin to despise the legitimate needs of others when it is in our power to help them. Proverbs 14:21 makes it very plain: “He who despises his neighbor sins; but he who has mercy on the poor, happy is he.” Again, in Proverbs 28:27: “He who gives to the poor will not lack, but he who hides his eyes will have many curses.” The man who is ungenerous will regret the day he withheld his aid from others; it is not only a positive blessing to help the poor, it is a positive curse not to do so. There is a certain poetic justice in this. “Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard” (Prov. 21:13).

It is not necessary to pursue this subject at length, since any student of the Bible knows that mercy and generosity are major themes of Scripture from beginning to end. However, the command to generosity is also qualified throughout the Bible. We are clearly not obligated to meet all the needs of everyone around us. Our charity is to be limited in at least three ways: by our time, by our resources, by God’s commandments. For example, “if anyone will not work, neither shall he eat” (2 Thes. 3:10). There are people with real needs, whom we are not to help, because of their disobedience, until they repent. Depending on the nature of the request we may

not be able to fulfill all that is requested of us; we cannot act contrary to one part of God's Word on the pretense of obeying another part of it. For example, there are many instances where one should not co-sign on another man's loan, merely because he thinks it is a need that I can meet; Proverbs is full of warnings about becoming surety for someone else in this way (Prov. 11:15; 17:18).

We are obligated to do what God says as far as our ability and resources allow. The needs of the brethren should always come first, before the needs of the world in general. Paul says in Galatians 6:10, "Let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith." We must first meet the needs of our own, and that may mean that there is nothing left for those outside; one of the consequences of rebellion is to be left without guarantee of support from the church. However, our charity is only limited by God's providence and by His commandments, and thus we must be ready to give what we can to meet legitimate needs, first those of our family, and afterward those of the world. It is a holy obligation to be generous, and it is a most hateful thing to see God's people without charity.

Meeting needs around us is only one aspect of our love toward all men. Love also means living lawfully toward our neighbors. Paul clarifies what it means to love both our neighbors and our enemies. It means keeping God's law. Love is the keeping and fulfilling of the law (Rom. 13:8–10). To keep the commandments toward them, to not sin against them, to do them good and not evil: that is what it means to love. Proverbs 3:29 says, "Do not devise evil against your neighbor" and tells us not to withhold what we owe to our neighbor when we have the ability to repay it. We are not to slander our neighbor (Prov. 24:28). We are not to tempt them into any kind of sin. We do good to them and not evil. Even if they sin against us, we still seek to do them good. We may rebuke them or publicly oppose them, but we may not sin against them. We are under holy obligation to be friendly to all men. It is the first demand of biblical friendship.

Friendship Beyond Friendliness

A second demand qualifies the demand of friendliness: though we are to be friendly to all we cannot be the friends, companions, or intimates of all. Though we are required to be friendly, we are to have certain criteria for those we choose to allow into our intimate circle. Choosing close companions must be done very carefully. In Psalm 119:63, David summarizes these criteria: “I am a companion of all who fear You, and of those who keep Your precepts.” David does not just embrace anyone off of the street as his friend. He associates closely only with those who fear God and keep His commandments. He may show love and friendliness to an unbelieving man, but that man could never be his friend. Was David then simply acting like a snob, acting “holier than thou”? Certainly not. He recognizes the realities of his nature and the realities of God’s demands upon him. “He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed” (Prov. 13:20). According to David, you cannot have fools for friends and escape the consequences. No one could ever be so upright and holy that he could afford to have foolish friends, because we are all influenced deeply by the people close to us.

Young people especially need to understand and avoid this temptation, as they are more susceptible to surrounding influences, whether they realize it or not. Their friends will either provoke them to holiness or encourage them in wickedness—it will be one or the other. It is never neutral. God has so constituted us that we will become like our friends. It is folly for a young person to think that he will be the one who will turn around all of his foolish friends. There are far too many examples in Scripture against this kind of thinking for anyone to seriously believe it, but still, being sinners, we always like to make ourselves out as great heroes who will save everyone else in the end. The reality is that we are not great heroes, especially when we are young. And he will be another fool who fancies that he will be the exception. He tells himself that while everybody else is corrupted by bad friends, he will change them. He seems to ignore the fact that God has

told him exactly the opposite. Over and over Scripture warns against ungodly companions. “My son, do not walk in the way with them, keep your foot from their path” (Prov. 1:15). “Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of evil. Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn away from it and pass on” (Prov. 4:14–15). It is not merely advice; it is a command from God. You may not continually associate with evil men as friends, companions, or intimates; instead, you have an obligation to avoid them. “Make no friendship with an angry man, and with a furious man do not go, lest you learn his ways and set a snare for your soul” (Prov. 22:24–25). “Do not be envious of evil men, nor desire to be with them” (Prov. 24:1).

Paul summarizes the whole matter in 1 Corinthians 15:33. “Do not be deceived,” he begins, because he knows that people love to think in this way. “Evil company corrupts good habits.” That is the rule; don’t think you will be the exception. Don’t be deceived and think that you’re some great spiritual giant who will stomp all the little rebel pygmies in your way, and make them all faithful, submissive Christians. Evil company always corrupts good manners. Thus God prohibits a binding relationship with unbelievers, in situations that might compel a believer to perform ungodly practices, in which one might be forced to do something contrary to God’s Word. We are forbidden to do that: we may not marry an unbeliever, or enter into any relationship that might bind us to do ungodly things.

Characteristic Companions

These teachings have a broader application than just to our physical companions. We may readily apply them against other things with which we share extended time. To watch the many evil entertainments which saturate our televisions is to keep company with evil men. How is it that we believe we can watch these blasphemous comedies, these foolish sitcoms, these wicked dramas, and still somehow remain innocent and

undefiled? Merely because one's evil companions are coming through an electronic tube and are not physically present in the house does not make them impotent; if anything, it makes them more dangerous. They have a more profound influence than anyone realizes. It is a folly to think that we can prosper spiritually when we spend the vast majority of our time in the company of unbelievers. There was a time when it was easier to escape such company, but now the television has put it into every home. A man may live alone, never seeing another living human being, but he can still be corrupted by ungodly companions.

The child of God realizes these things, and he longs therefore for holy companionship. One of the first marks of a man's new heart is a gradual change of his friends. If they are not converted with him, he must eventually leave them behind. It may happen more rapidly with some than with others, but it always happens, for we always want to be with those who love the same things, who desire the same things, and who will teach, encourage and stir us up. For those who love God, God gives them a love for those who fear Him and desire to be holy; we have seen that David had such a love. Like him, we must avoid anything or anyone who hinders us in the progress of holiness and the fear of God.

We are known by our friends, because the qualities of our friends reveal where our comforts, interests, and enjoyments truly lie. Men are naturally attracted to those with whom they agree: a drunkard will never be happy in the society of teetotalers. He will never be comfortable in the society of holy men who know how to drink in moderation. The former bore him; the latter convict him of his error. This example has a broader application, for the ungodly cannot tolerate the godly. "An unjust man is an abomination to the righteous, and he who is upright in the way is an abomination to the wicked" (Prov. 29:27). It is inevitable that the righteous man is as offensive to the wicked as the wicked are to the righteous. In light of this, each of us should pause and reflect on our own situation.

What are your friends like? Whom do you desire to be with? Do you enjoy being with the people of God?

Do you like to be with people who know more than you do, or do they bother you? Do you always like to be around those who are less intelligent than you are? There is something wrong with the man who avoids those who know more than he; there is something wrong if he must always be the teacher and never the student. We should desire friends who know more than we do and who are farther along in their sanctification. If they will tolerate us, that is the kind of friend we seek. Of course, we should also have friends who are behind us, intellectually or spiritually. Relationships with superiors, inferiors, and equals are all necessary for true growth. Some people are saved later than others, some people grow up in better ecclesiastical and familial environments than others, and therefore we are each obligated to help one another. Do you have friends who are willing to rebuke you when you sin or fall into slackness? Do you see the vital necessity of godly friends? Are you increasing in your friendliness? Are you actively building friendships among God's people? There will be no prosperity or growth in grace if this is not so.

All of this, of course, reminds us of what a blessed thing it is to have a friend who sticks closer than a brother, our kinsman-redeemer, our holy Friend. Without Him as our friend, we would be of all men the most to be pitied. It is vitally important to have faithful companions, for He is the One who is preeminently the companion of His people. We need more of our brothers to live together with us in the same manner as our Savior: always with us, never leaving nor forsaking us, but causing us to grow in grace and faithfulness to Him.