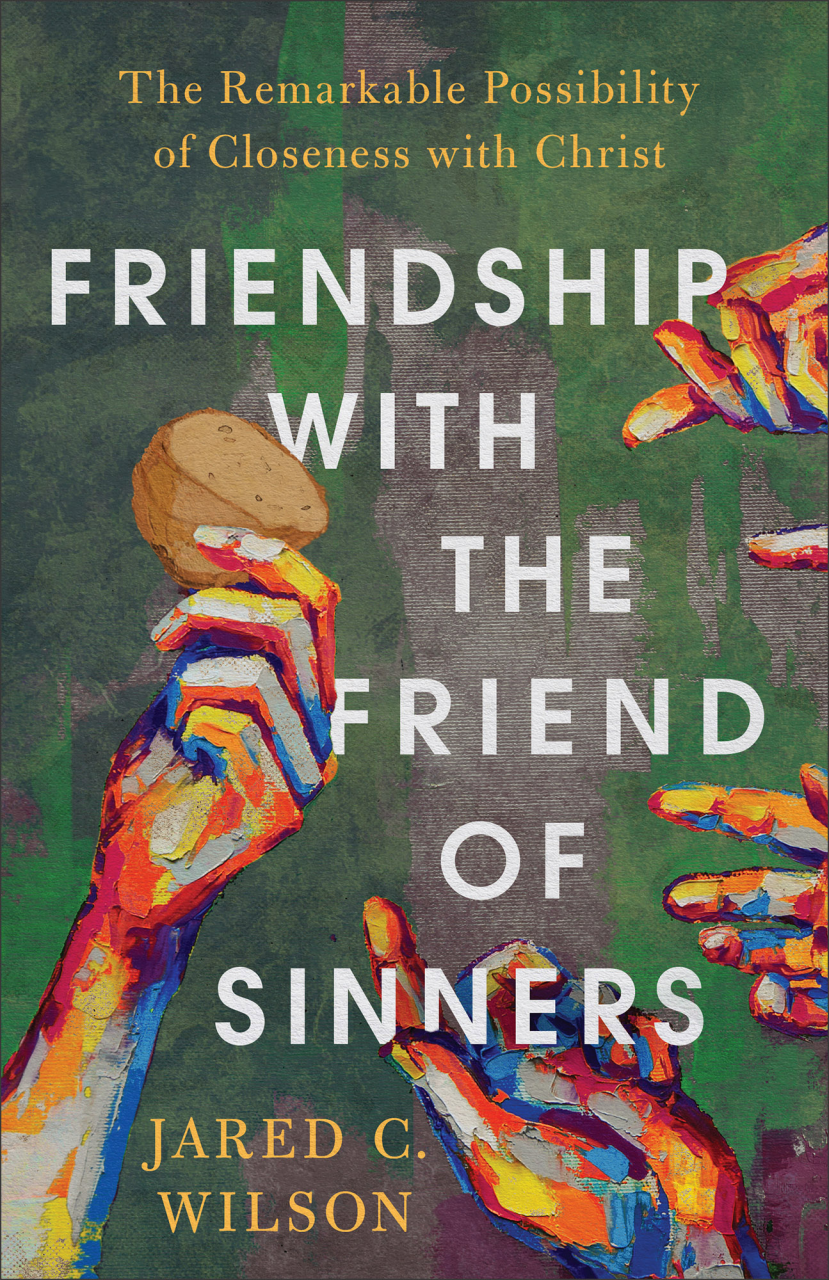


The Remarkable Possibility
of Closeness with Christ

An abstract painting featuring several hands rendered in vibrant, layered colors of red, orange, yellow, and blue. The hands are positioned as if holding a round, brown loaf of bread. The background is a textured mix of green and grey tones. The title text is overlaid on the central part of the image.

FRIENDSHIP
WITH
THE
FRIEND
OF
SINNERS

JARED C.
WILSON

FRIENDSHIP WITH THE FRIEND OF SINNERS

The Remarkable Possibility
of Closeness with Christ

JARED C. WILSON



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Jared C. Wilson, *Friendship with the Friend of Sinners*

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For the Thinklings—
Bill, Bird, Blo, and Phil

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I do not call you servants anymore, because a servant doesn't know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father.

John 15:15

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been so lonely you could die?

I have.

There's a good kind of solitude. The kind that's refreshing and renewing. The kind that allows a body to recharge and a mind to reset. There's the "getting away it from all" kind of aloneness that's healthy for a soul normally drowning in busyness and overstimulation.

And then there's the kind of solitude that brings with it an overwhelming feeling of desolation. It's a feeling of abandonment. You don't even have to be literally alone to feel it. You could be in a crowded room, at a party, with your family, even at church. No matter the circumstances, your *heart* is lonely.

It's a feeling akin to depression. Maybe you feel like nobody cares. Maybe you feel like people might care, but they don't really understand. Maybe they understand, but they can't do anything to help. Even the people who want to fix you can't fix you.

That's the kind of aloneness that's hard to climb out of. It's oppressive and suffocating.

More and more people suffer from this kind of loneliness every day. Our world, with no lack of relational outlets and social connections, virtual and otherwise, is nevertheless stifling under an epidemic of loneliness. It's an aloneness of the soul.

I have more than a few friends who have suffered from this affliction. I've been heartbroken to hear them recount their struggles. I've been surprised by these revelations too, though I shouldn't be, given my own struggles. I've wondered how I didn't notice, why I didn't know. I've been hurt that they didn't reach out for help. I say to them, "I wish I'd known! I would've been there for you."

But I know from experience that when you're in the midst of such darkness, it's hard to believe even your closest friends can help or would want to. *They couldn't do anything, even if they wanted to*, I've said to myself. *Plus, I don't want to burden them.*

Nobody wants to be the friend who brings their friends down.

So we bear the burden alone. And the weight of it begins to play tricks on our minds. We aren't just alone; we feel insignificant. We aren't just forgotten; we feel forsaken.

I've wrestled with this feeling off and on throughout my life. I was an insecure, neurotic kid. I'll share some reasons for that with you later in this book, but for now it's enough to say that I have always struggled with feeling *disapproved of*, with wanting to be known and understood and at the same time loved and accepted, but believing it wasn't possible. And then, when I finally did find someone who loved me and accepted me, I made a miserable mess of the whole thing.

I brought a world of sinful habits and toxic behaviors into my marriage, mainly through the use of pornography. I tried to keep these sins hidden, but I couldn't manage it for very long. Eventually, my ongoing, unrepentant betrayal blew up in my face. My marriage was wrecked. I was utterly alone again.

While my wife did not divorce me, we lived like roommates in our home. I slept in the guest bedroom and walked through each day like a zombie, plunged into deep depression and despair. I thought often about taking my own life.

This was the worst experience of my life, but believe it or not, it was in this soul-shriveling battle for hope that I rediscovered a soul-filling faith. These are the kinds of times faith is really made for, after all. As long as life is comfortable and convenient, we can make do with a comfortable and convenient Christianity. As long as life is easy, we can manage with an easy-believism. But in our lowest moments, a superficial faith won't hack it.

During that time, for about a year, I vacillated between an inconsolable sadness and a dangerous numbness. I spent countless nights facedown on the floor of that guest bedroom, begging God to do something for me. To do what? I wasn't sure. I just knew I needed him to fix it. (You pray totally differently when you feel your very life is at stake.) I had come to the end of my rope.

And then one night, circumstantially no different from any of the previous nights, something different happened. I was crying into the carpet as I had hundreds of times before, pleading with God to help me, and there was a change. I felt as if God reached through the roof into that room and grabbed me in his hand. I was reminded of the message of

the gospel, the good news that God loves even sinners like me and that God approves even of sinners like me because of the saving work of Jesus. It wasn't a message I didn't know. It wasn't a message I hadn't heard before. But I heard it that night *as if for the first time*.

In a very real way, at the moment I most deserved to be utterly alone and rejected, Jesus came into that room, sat on the floor next to me, put his arm around me, and said, "It's going to be okay."

At the lowest moment of my life, I came face-to-face with my real self. And I came face-to-face with the truest friend.

I found him true because at that moment I had the least to offer him. I had nothing, in fact. Oh, sure, in the early days of my spiritual journey, I thought I was doing all kinds of big things for Jesus. I operated under the pretense that I was a great friend *to him*. Then all of that got torn away. I knew myself then better than I ever had. I couldn't pretend I had it all together. I couldn't fool others, and I couldn't fool myself. My true self had emerged, and he was a huge, stinking mess.

To my surprise, my friend Jesus didn't pull away. Instead, believe it or not, he got closer.

In my deepest, most despondent loneliness, I found a deeper friendship with Jesus. I learned that the power of the gospel is available even to sinful Christians who should know better.

I'm still a terrible friend to Jesus. But he is still the truest friend to me.

This spiritual reality has become the theme of my life and ministry. While I'm readily aware of the dangers of subscribing to a so-called gospel-centrality as merely an ideology or a

church methodology or, even worse, a consumeristic marketing gimmick, I cannot shake the haunting of my soul of the nearness of Jesus for a sinner like me. For me, this stuff isn't a shtick. It was, and is, the difference between death and life.

This book you hold in your hands is in many ways the result of that terrible, wonderful night on that guest bedroom floor. It's also the culmination of my ensuing years of exploring friendship with Jesus not as an idea but as a daily reality. I am prone to wander. I am given to sin. But closeness with Christ has changed my life.

The possibility of friendship with Jesus is the greatest hope any soul could ever have.

It's my prayer that by reading this book you will share this hope with me. We'll begin by exploring some of the hardships of connection and the pitfalls of relationships. We'll consider some of our problems with friendships, the trouble we face having friends and being a friend. But we'll come out on the other side of that just staring into the wonder of Christ and all that he is to us and with us and for us.

If you'll let me be your friend, just for this little leg of your spiritual journey, I'll show you the Holy One who loves to make friends with sinners.

Where Did Everybody Go?

(The Possibility of Friendship with Jesus)

Five friends I had, and two of them snakes.

Frederick Buechner, *Godric*¹

There is no friend truer than Jesus. This is a truth often difficult to believe, however, even for Christians, since we cannot see him. It's hard to believe someone is there when we cannot see them there, much less believe that this someone we cannot see is the best friend available to us. And yet this is the calling of every Christian in this age—to place faith over sight and not just trust Jesus is there but that even his invisible self is better than all the visible alternatives.

When I was a young man, it was very common to hear in church circles that Christianity is not about religion but relationship. The claim was made enough to quickly earn its place in the category of cliché. We have since found very good reasons to emphasize that Christianity is indeed “about religion,” at least insofar as we have come to reap the bitter harvest of several generations lacking discipleship, spiritual formation, and emphasis on spiritual disciplines.

It turned out that what many people meant when they said “relationship not religion” was actually just a sentimental religion. And the evangelical church, particularly in the West, now suffers from this sentimental religion and all that comes with it—the treating of church like an entertainment complex, Christianity like a consumer product, and Jesus like the glorified chaplain of our self-interests. Evangelicals’ relationship with Jesus is now like a Facebook friendship. We “like” him.

Biblically speaking, of course, Christianity is both religion *and* relationship. In fact, these categories, properly understood, are not so distinguishable from each other, and it turns out each must fuel the other. A relationship with Jesus without a commitment to his commands, to his church and her ordinances, to his shaping of our entire lives through the (even imperfect) pursuit of disciplines according to his likeness isn’t the kind of relationship he desires from us. Similarly, a Christian religion without a spiritual hunger for his grace, a humble surrender to his character, and a desperate desire for intimacy with his very presence is just religiosity.

There’s no better religion than Christianity, sure. But there is no higher, deeper, or truer human experience than to know Jesus Christ.

The most frightening portion of Scripture, to me, is undoubtedly Matthew 7:21–23, in which Jesus himself tells us that in the end, many will stand before him and claim to have done great works in his name. They will attest to miracles, prophecies, exorcisms—all under the pretense of allegiance to Jesus. And he will say to them, essentially, “I have no idea who you are.”

“I never knew you,” he’ll say. “Depart from me” (v. 23).

I don’t know about you, but I’ve never performed a miracle or cast out a demon. I haven’t really even prophesied—at least, not in any dramatic sense of foretelling. What I have done in Jesus’s name is a lot more ordinary. I’ve gone to church all my life, even pastored in a few. I’ve shared the gospel with some unbelievers here and there, though not as much as I should’ve. I give regularly to my church, and I give to a number of other charities besides. Generally speaking, I try to be a good person. I look out for my neighbors, I do my best to be kind to everyone, I don’t (often) lie. I don’t look at porn, and I don’t cheat on my taxes. I vote according to Christian values. As a further advantage, I suppose, I should add that I even write Christian books and preach Christian sermons and teach at a Christian seminary.

This may all sound like bragging to you—it stands out to me right away how many sentences in the above paragraph begin with *I*—but my point is that none of these things even comes close to the kind of extravagant works Jesus declares may be performed by people he will nevertheless send to hell on the last day.

Maybe “Christianity is not a religion but a relationship” isn’t too far off the mark. The sobering conclusion we must make in reading warning passages like Matthew 7:21–23 is

this: you and I must take care that we *actually know Jesus*. There's no more dangerous enemy to have than Jesus. But there is also no truer friend.

Antisocial Media

A couple of years ago, when for the umpteenth time I was the subject of an online character assassination attempt, I got curious about the content of one particular hitman's social media post about me. Seeing my name tagged, I clicked on over. I wasn't shocked to see that what he'd posted was untrue. But I was shocked to see that someone I'd considered a friend had "liked" the post.

Now, I know in the grand scheme of things, people liking and unliking things on social media is the smallest potatoes you can find. I sometimes laugh when I think about the Puritans or the Reformers looking down from heaven at our obsession with social media tomfoolery. I'm sure they would find it stupid and petty and incredibly immature. But in this day and age, when we signal this way, we aren't doing something wholly insignificant. We're showing our approval, our allegiance, our alignment. So when I saw that this friend had approved a rather outrageous lie about me, it wasn't just the "like" that irritated me. It was the idea that he approved of the outrageous lie without doing what a friend ought to do in such instances—if not defend me, at the very least ask me about it.

In his defense, I suppose I should mention that we weren't extraordinarily close. But we had ministered in the same area for several years, shared meals and other fellowship, and regularly communicated in friendly and supportive ways. I

certainly didn't think that if he was going through a rough time in his life I'd be high on his list of phone calls for advice, but in no way did I expect he saw me as anything less than a friend. So I messaged him.

I told him I was hurt by his endorsement of someone's un-Christlike comments about me. I acknowledged that he and I didn't see everything the same way but reaffirmed that I had considered him a friend. I also said I wished he'd brought to me personally any concerns he might have about my character.

At this point, a friend would say, "You're right. I'm sorry." Maybe they'd offer some explanation as to their reasoning that might mitigate the offense. I don't know. Instead, he said he didn't know what I was talking about, which hurt more. Either he was lying, or my reputation and character meant so little to him he couldn't even be bothered to keep track of what insults he was approving.

So I sent him a screenshot of the post, which, of course, jogged his memory. And then—get this—he asked if the accusation was true.

I paused for a moment and thought about his question, which answered my own question about how little my character meant to him. Here's what a friend would do: if he saw an accusation against me, and he wasn't sure if it was true, he would at the very least not endorse it! But ideally, he'd also reach out and ask me about it. And that's when I learned a guy I thought was a friend wasn't.

This scenario has happened to me more than once over the last few years, with some folks I've been a lot closer to than I was with this guy. This hurt was very minor compared to other friends lost, even one or two friends who effectively became

enemies. Maybe you haven't experienced this particular modern form of "unfriending," but I'm willing to bet you've lost friends over the years—or people you *thought* were friends. The closer you thought them to be, the more hurt you felt.

Complicating our experience of friendship is the fact that the concept of friendship itself has become deformed in the twenty-first century. Things have been trending this way for years.

I'm not a sociologist, but I am reasonably sure that everything from the post-WWII rise of commuter culture to even the slowly changing trends in modern home architecture have contributed to an increasing sense of insulation and isolation. In his landmark 2000 book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam expanded on an essay he published in 1995 about the deterioration of the experience of community in many of our social institutions. Clubs, civic organizations, and other "fraternal" spaces have been hemorrhaging members since the 1960s. The title of Putnam's book comes from the paradox of an increase of bowlers concurrent with the decrease in the number of bowling leagues over the years. (People are more and more likely to bowl alone.)

Your grandfather might have been a member of the Kiwanis or the Rotary or some other fraternal organization. Your father probably was not. Men my age are usually not. We have enjoyed a rise in third places—think coffee shops—where we can go to be together, and some of us do use these spaces that way, but more often than not, they are filled with people who are alone with their laptops or phones.

The smartphone, in particular, has had one of the single most detrimental effects on our experience of friendship. The

first smartphone supposedly went on the market in 1994, but it was the 2007 debut of the iPhone (and its ensuing rivals) that really has done a number on us. On two fronts, the smartphone has stealthily waged a war against the necessary ingredients for the experience of friendship. First, its 24/7 access to information inflates our sense of self-sufficiency. For instance, there was a time when, if you couldn't think of the name of that supporting actor in that one movie you saw that one time, you just went on not knowing. Maybe you remembered later. But *not knowing things*, generally, was just part of life. Oh, maybe if you wondered how many miles it is from here to the moon, you could go to the library and find the answer in a book. Sometimes you could even call the information desk at the library and they would look it up for you. But more often than not, we were just used to not knowing everything. The smartphone "fixed" all that. Now everybody knows everything—or at least thinks they do. We all have instant access all the time to any bit of information we want.

Now, having ready access to all the information in the world isn't a bad thing in and of itself. But it has changed us, and not necessarily for the better. This constant access has made us less dependent on other people, more distracted from life offline (because we find it inefficient), and generally more "in our own heads." Thanks also to the internet, a lot of us don't even need to experience the social environments of workplaces, or at least not in the same way we used to.

Second, the morphing of the smartphone from luxury resource to basic utility has fundamentally changed the way we think about and interact with other people. We're

“smarter” than we’ve ever been but are less literate. We are more “social” than we’ve ever been but are less socially adept. Perhaps you know that the genesis of Facebook took place in Mark Zuckerberg’s Harvard dorm room as a crude on-line experiment comparing the relative “hotness” of female students. It eventually became a place for college students to demonstrate the relative hotness of their social lives.

Over the last decade, Facebook has become the social media platform of choice for aging baby boomers. It used to be that you had to have an .edu email domain to even get an account; now I don’t know many college students who would even think about using the platform. But I also don’t know many people who would argue that the aging demographic of Facebook’s users has had any significant effect on the maturity of how it’s used. Yes, a lot of our aunts and grandmas use it to see family photos and reconnect with high school classmates. A lot of churches use it to flexibly disseminate information to their older members. But by and large, Facebook is still a place of objectification and social dysfunction. It just revolves more around politics than collegiate interests now.

What the entirety of social media has done is provide a platform for our performative interests. We can certainly use it to communicate with friends and even to make meaningful connections with strangers, but the individualistic nature of the whole thing has proven a black hole for mature socialization. Everything we know or pretend to know must now be cut up into digestible soundbites, “hot takes,” or denunciations of people and things we don’t like. It honestly ought to be called *antisocial media*. What was ostensibly designed to bring people together has done the opposite. We’re more

tempted to see others as rivals or enemies. We dehumanize and objectify, because it's easy to do that when you don't have to look someone in the face or have them look into yours.

But even when we do, it's getting harder and harder to really see people, to listen to them, to connect in substantive ways, and to interact with humility and gentleness, because the all-day pervasiveness of social media is shaping us into the kinds of people who don't want to.

I don't know if you're buying any of this, but if you are, you can probably also see how, for Christians, the shaping influence of social media culture poses a real danger of making us act less like Jesus. And the less we become like Jesus, the less we will understand how to do real friendship.

Putting the *I* in Friend

There are other significant factors in the deformation of relationships, of course. One huge influence on the rise of dehumanization and objectification in our day has been the rise of porn addiction across multiple generations. We could also mention other contributors such as our modern cultural sacraments of workaholism and busyness and expressive individualism. The latter is an especially growing threat and making sizable inroads within evangelicalism.

It turns out that, because of the fall detailed in Genesis 3, none of us needs help in becoming self-interested, self-centered people, but we have endless innovations at our disposal to aid an increasing focus on self-exaltation. We've even smuggled this self-focus, in the form of consumerism, into our experience of spirituality.

What do you get when thirty years of attractional church programming—which is oriented largely around consumer tastes and individual “application”—meets a secular philosophy oriented around the god of the self, in which *the* truth is subservient to “my truth” and questions of identity are answered not in traditional religion but in cultural expressions of race, politics, and sexuality? Well, the nuanced answer is that you get tribalism instead of true community.

Tribes aren’t all bad, of course. We all have a tribe or two. Tribes, plainly put, are where we share mutual interests and affinities. The problem with a lot of modern tribalism, however, is that it provides an illusion of belonging founded largely on a mutual grievance or self-interest. And a bunch of people together all focused on themselves isn’t usually a place where self-sacrificial relationships germinate.

We see this in the increasing fundamentalist spirit of tribes both on the extreme left and extreme right of politics. If you’re familiar with the horseshoe theory, you know what I’m talking about. It basically goes like this: the further to the extreme left or right one’s views go, the closer they get to the extreme of the other side. Which is why we now face the increase of angry authoritarianism threatening us from opposite sides of the political aisle. Extreme leftists and rightists both want to ban books and qualify free speech. Both want to curtail (different aspects of) religious liberty. Both are in favor of (different kinds of) authoritarian government. And both have given rise to instances of political violence.

This extreme tribalism, following two generations of entertainment-driven faith, is now more and more deforming the growth of honest faith in Christian churches. It becomes difficult to open up to anybody, to share one’s fears or hurts

or sins, to “do life” together when you know you’re just one misstep away from being declared an enemy by someone who claimed to be your brother or sister. Extreme tribalism on the right has made it more costly for some Christians to talk about their experiences of racism or injustice and made any Christian questioning of the moral character of Republican politicians into a kind of heresy. Extreme tribalism on the left has made it more costly for some Christians to simply affirm what the Bible says about gender and sexuality, things Christians have affirmed largely without internal controversy for two thousand years, and has turned every Bible story into a case study on identity politics or critical theory.

Extreme tribalism can even distort how we hear God’s voice. When tales of royal victory in the Old Testament are taken out of context and thrust onto modern American patriotism, or when the closeness between David and Jonathan is twisted to sanction homosexuality, we are hearing what theologian Carl Trueman calls “the triumph of the modern self”² over the clear voice of the Spirit.

So now that we all suspect each other, now that we all have our own interests at heart, now that most of our interactions and opinions are tuned toward the performative and the belligerent, how is it exactly any of us are supposed to know what real friendship is like?

Friendship Made for Trouble

We’re in a big mess. Thankfully, many of us nevertheless are journeying through this cultural morass of social deformation with a few friends. But I’ll tell you, one of the hardest parts of navigating these recent days—one of the hardest

parts of just getting older, actually—is finding out who your friends *aren't*.

This is one of the key truths I've learned about friendship in the last ten years: a friend isn't someone who's close when it's enjoyable to be close but one who doesn't bail when it's not. They may not always stand right by your side when everything goes sideways in your life, but they're not running away either. At the very least, they're certainly not helping things go sideways! And the best friends are the ones who not only stay by your side but aim to help you face what you're facing.

Proverbs 17:17 says, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (ESV). I like that, in part, because of what it doesn't say. It doesn't say a brother is born *from* adversity. It's kind of rare to make true friends in the midst of difficult times. Sometimes it works. I think of soldiers who come home as brothers for life because of the shared and profound experience of war. It's hard to break a bond born of holding someone else's life in your hands. Similarly, there's a bond that sometimes develops between someone who needed rescuing from a deadly situation and the one who courageously rescued them. But mostly, we make friends in ordinary times of social interaction—at work, at school, at church, at the park, on a team, and so forth. We have some things in common we can talk about. We have mutual interests we can share. We do things together and share secrets and share jokes and share dreams.

Then trouble comes. And you find out if all of it added up to friendship or not. A real friend loves at all times, and a brother is born *for* the adversity.

As hard as it is sometimes to face, it's the winnowing of friends through various adversities that helps us love our

remaining friends more. On the one hand, I'm afraid to admit that in my late forties, I have fewer close friends than I did when I was in my early twenties. It's especially sobering given the current deadly epidemic of loneliness among middle-aged men. But on the other hand, I'm happy to know that the few friends I've got left have pretty much seen it all! They've been through the fire with me and have emerged showing their trueness. These are the guys with whom I'd walk into more adversity.

I think of that moment in the movie *Tombstone* when, after narrowly surviving a nasty gunfight together, a member of Wyatt Earp's outfit asks the sickly, frail Doc Holliday why he'd leave his bed to risk his life in such a dangerous way.

Holliday simply says, "Wyatt Earp is my friend."

His questioner responds, "Hell, I got lots of friends," to which Holliday replies, "Well, I don't."³

Once upon a time, I was leading a young adult ministry at a very large church, and I believed God was calling me to break away and plant that ministry as an independent church of our own. I didn't want to be divisive, and I met with our host church's leaders to explain my vision. They understood and, amazingly, gave their blessing. But I knew I had a leadership team for the young adult ministry that was too large for a small church plant. I also knew that some of those leaders, ones previously recruited by the first organizer of our ministry, had never really shared my particular vision for teaching and mission. I knew a division was on the horizon. We had a difficult meeting where I basically laid out the intended plan. There was pushback. There was confusion. A line was being drawn. It didn't get heated. Nobody seemed angry. But a severe disappointment settled into the room.

In a way it was clarifying. For all of us. And in the end, that leadership team essentially split. Just four leaders felt called to leave and help plant a new church with me. And while I was nervous about losing some talented folks in key areas of ministry that would be hugely helpful in starting a new work, the five of us remaining leaders became even closer.

It's not easy to plant a church. We were trying to do something none of us had done before and something not many were yet doing in our context—plant a gospel-centered, missional church. But being “in the trenches” together made us closer. It created a joy in our work, even as we struggled to grow a tiny ministry, that I am incredibly thankful for to this day.

That church plant doesn't exist anymore. But our friendships do. In fact, nearly twenty years later, two of those leaders are still two of the best friends my wife and I have.

Real friendships endure.

Real friendships are made for trouble. Because how can you know? How can you know if someone is a true friend if you experience only agreement and happiness and comfort together? Just like our marriage vows are only as true as our experience together of the sickness and poverty and death doing us part. It's easy to be married when marriage is easy. And it's easy to be friends when friendship is easy.

And all of this brings me back to the concept of friendship with Jesus. Because he sees a lot more than even my closest friends do. He doesn't just see the things I tweet or post; he sees the things I think, the things I desire. I don't pretend to be a trouble-free person, but even my wife doesn't know the half of it. Yet Jesus sees it all. So I think of Matthew 7:23 and shudder.

What a Friend We Have in Jesus

It's somewhat encouraging to me to know Jesus himself experienced abandonment by his friends. And then I think about the fact that I still abandon him just about every day in little circumstances here and there. That's not so encouraging. In fact, I'm pretty terrible at friendship myself. But if anything, my regular awareness of my awfulness makes me tune in even closer to his responses to these kinds of momentary betrayals.

The truth is, we're all terrible friends to Jesus. But he is still the truest friend we could have. In John 15:15, Jesus says to his disciples, "I do not call you servants anymore, because a servant doesn't know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father."

He calls his disciples *friends*. He says this before his arrest, before his crucifixion, before the sorrowful disappointment of his burial, knowing full well his friends are about to fail him. He knows they're going to betray him, abandon him, and deny him. And he still calls them friends.

Contrasted with what he promises in Matthew 7:23 to say to people who claimed to do all kinds of awesome things for him, we must wonder, *What gives?*

Let's just consider the scene of his arrest, for instance (Mark 14:43–50). Jesus and his disciples have just eaten the Passover meal, during which they enjoyed an incredibly intimate fellowship, reclining against each other at the table. Jesus is preparing them for his death and what will come after. These are precious moments building one on top of another, the commitment of Christ to his followers—and they to him—in stark relief.

Now they have retired to the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus intercedes in prayer for them. Thus begins the narrative downhill slope to the base of the mount of Calvary. While he's been praying in agony, his friends have been sleeping, so he wakes them up and alerts them that his betrayal and arrest are imminent.

The pace of the scene in Mark's Gospel is almost breathless. Mark goes toward the cross at a breakneck pace, rushing even more quickly at this point than before. Each of the episodes leading up to the crucifixion is short and punchy. You can feel the dizzying hurry of it all. And this feeling is captured especially in the arrest scene. It almost feels like chaos once things get rolling.

But Jesus stands out in this scene by contrast to all of the panic swirling around him. Do you remember that time in a boat where everyone was freaking out while Jesus was sleeping? Well, now as the real storm approaches, Jesus in the garden is the only one awake while everyone else is taking a nap. But after the disciples have been roused, they go right back into panic mode. Jesus alone projects a kind of stillness.

This little scene is important, because it shows us yet again the stark contrast between Jesus and ourselves. So often our desires, our passions, and our sacrifices don't have Jesus at the center of them as supremely worthy.

Judas's actions are the most obvious example here. This man's priorities haven't been subtle! He's practically been telegraphing this moment for days. Jesus predicted this was going to happen, but Judas, as far as we know, spent no time demurring or denying. Unlike with Peter's foretold denial, there's no parallel scene of Judas saying, "I would never do that!"

The betrayer thinks he can play it cool. But we know that his desire is about money and control. In Mark 14:11, we're told the promise of money set up Judas's desire to betray his Lord. And that fatal trajectory culminates here. In verse 45, he greets Jesus with the honorific of "Rabbi," which is the customary sign of a disciple to his master. But it's only a ruse. It's a falsely expressed desire. It's all a lie.

Judas does this, we're told elsewhere, for just thirty pieces of silver, which isn't all that much money. I mean, it's not exactly chump change, but it's not a fortune either. In today's dollars, depending on what kind of silver coins were paid, it'd be somewhere between one hundred and four hundred dollars. Certainly not nearly enough, you would think, to trade in for allegiance to the true King of Israel.

But when your desires are disordered, you'll see worth in unworthy places. When your desires are disordered, you'll hold cheap things as costly and costly things as cheap.

I wonder if Jesus was even communicating this truth in a subtle, ironic way. Knowing Judas was a greedy betrayer right out of the gate, he still put Judas in charge of the money (John 12:6)! Why would he do that? I don't know, except perhaps to show us that Jesus holds money loosely. Maybe it's also meant to show us that *we* ought to as well. And while Jesus isn't endorsing greed, of course, he has orchestrated this entire thing as the Lord of the universe to bring to the surface how even our greatest earthly treasures are a mere pittance compared to his own all-surpassing glory.

There are so many biblical scenes that point to this truth. There's the parable about the man who sold everything he had in order to get the field where the treasure was buried, and the parable about the man who sold everything he had in

order to get that one priceless pearl. But the most heartbreaking scenes are probably the ones where someone *doesn't* see the surpassing worth of Christ and his kingdom. In Mark 10, for example, Jesus meets the man we know as the rich young ruler. “Sell all you have,” Jesus basically tells him. “Give it to the poor. And then come follow me.” Jesus wants this young man to trade his great treasure for the greater, far-surpassing treasure of Jesus himself. But verse 22 tells us the young man went away dismayed and grieving. His desire was disordered. In the very next scene, Jesus tells his disciples, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” (10:23).

It's a startling pronouncement. And we should apply it well. You may not have a lot of money, but where is your wealth? Do you treasure it more than Jesus?

Judas's desires weren't ordered around Jesus. Ultimately, money was his god. Money may not be your god of choice, but the point still applies to us. Our desires reveal our true object of worship. What are you tempted to pursue, what do you crave, what do you long for *more* than the friendship of your Savior? Only he can satisfy. Only he can deliver on all his promises. Only he can give us true joy.

But perhaps Judas's example isn't the most apt for our particular lack of commitment to Jesus. Very few of us would betray our Savior, right? At least, not that way. But what about betrayals of a different kind?

“One of those who stood by drew his sword, struck the high priest's servant, and cut off his ear” (Mark 14:47). We know from the account in John's Gospel that the servant's name is Malchus and the impulsive swordsman is Peter. Now, we already know Peter is a pretty passionate guy. He speaks

when he shouldn't. He's constantly jockeying for position. He jumps out of boats. He even tries to rebuke Jesus at times.

Here Peter's passion gets the best of him again. But what is really driving this passion? Protecting Jesus? Maybe. More immediately, however, we may think of Peter's actions as being driven by a persistent worldly conception about the kingdom of God.

See, Peter's vision, not unlike that of most Jews of his time, is that the Messiah's coming must involve a violent, political overthrow of the Roman oppressors. Most of the messianic expectation in this day revolved around images of warfare, of physical liberation, of punishing their foreign occupiers.

On the surface, it may seem like Peter is doing a good thing, a sincere thing, defending Jesus. But it's really his own self-centered agenda at work, his own ambition, his own misunderstanding and misuse of the notion of the kingdom of God.

I don't think I'm making this up. In Matthew's parallel account, we even see that Jesus rebuked Peter for this very notion, saying after this violent outburst, "Put your sword back in its place because all who take up the sword will perish by the sword" (26:52). And in Luke's account we know that Jesus then goes on to pick up Malchus's ear and stick it back on its bloody stump (22:51). In other words, Jesus is saying, "Peter, my kingdom doesn't come by worldly passions. It doesn't come by violent overthrow of our earthly enemies. It comes by laying down our lives."

Doing worldly things in Jesus's name isn't the same as treasuring Jesus. And as that scary passage in Matthew 7 warns us, even doing *religious* things in Jesus's name isn't always the same as treasuring Jesus.

There are a lot of people claiming to speak for God today, a lot of people claiming to do things in Jesus's name. Every day on social media we find professing Christians cursing their enemies, reviling their brothers and sisters, hating each other—all somehow in the name of Jesus.

Is it possible that our chopping off ears in Jesus's name is no different from a betrayer's kiss? It has the appearance of affection, the appearance of passion, but it has self at the center.

When the children of Israel made that golden calf in the wilderness and began to worship it, Exodus 32:5 tells us that Aaron ascribed their worship to God! They made an idol to worship but somehow also made the claim that they weren't trading in their allegiance to YHWH. They were bowing to the golden calf and calling it worship of the Lord.

But what would it look like to see Jesus as worthy of our greatest passion? It would look exactly as he said—through self-crucifixion, it would look like loving our enemies, blessing those who persecute us, and being willing to be counted among the rubbish of this world if it means aligning with the way of Christ. It means handing our lives as a blank check over to the true Lord, surrendering our passions to him to channel as he pleases. It means repenting of our ways and going his, no matter the cost. It means seeing him as so, so worthy of our greatest passion.

Jesus Stands Alone

In the end, when all of these would-be followers of Jesus in Mark 14 realize their own ways are crumbling, the crisis proves devastating to them. They don't see friendship

with Jesus as worth the incredible cost. He has told them that following him means “[taking] up their cross” (Matt. 16:24), but when it comes time to do it, Jesus is left to the cross alone.

Mark 14:50 is haunting: “They all deserted him and ran away.” In that moment, there were more precious things to all of them than Jesus. He wasn’t worthy of their greatest passion.

Jesus calls all of his disciples to lay down their lives for his sake. This includes you and me, if we consider ourselves followers of Jesus. It’s worth looking into the future from Mark 14 a bit to be reminded that tradition tells us Peter, the impetuous idolater in this scene and the ardent denier of Jesus in the next scene (vv. 66–72), goes on after his restoration to a great apostolic ministry and even to his own death on a cross, which he requested be executed upside down. Why? Because he didn’t consider himself worthy even of Christ’s death. Somehow Peter found the grace to find Christ worthy of the greatest sacrifice.

And Jesus is certainly worthy of our sacrifice. But ours isn’t the greatest. The apostle Peter’s upside-down crucifixion, as terrifying and terrible as that was, wasn’t the greatest sacrifice either. No, Christ’s sacrifice is the greatest. And ultimately, Christ had to go to the cross because he alone is holy. He alone is sinless. He alone could make sufficient atonement for idolaters like Peter and idolaters like you and me. He alone is a true friend.

Only Jesus is worthy of the greatest sacrifice. Only Jesus is worthy enough for the cross.

Ultimately, the reason Jesus made the greatest sacrifice is not because we’re worthy of it but because he is. His glory

is the greatest reality in all of existence. His name is above every name. His holiness prevails over all.

The rebellion of sinners cannot—and will not—have the final word, the final say, the final victory. Mark 14:49 is in fact an exclamation point on this truth: “The Scriptures must be fulfilled.”

At the cross, Jesus wins the ultimate victory, because he alone is worthy. And we will be singing for all eternity, according to Revelation 5:12, not “We are worthy,” but “Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered!” Worthy is *he* “to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing!” Forever and ever, amen!

And while this makes so much of God and so little of us, it is still such good news for us. In fact, it couldn’t be good news for us if it weren’t true. You and I aren’t worthy of that sacrifice, not worthy of that cross.

If even the most religious or most moral person we could find died on that cross for us, we’d still be dead in our sins, because even the best person is still a sinner. Only Jesus could make the atoning sacrifice for us, because only Jesus is a sinless Savior. Only Jesus could be a spotless sacrifice. Only Jesus is good enough to make the sacrifice that satisfies the just wrath of God. And it’s only in Jesus, then, that we find the worthiness to enter the glorious presence of our holy God.

It’s only through Jesus that we can even be friends with Jesus. His blood purchases our passage into his everlasting life.

Isaiah 53:6 says that all of us like sheep have gone astray. All of us, born sinners, have deserted God and run away. In the garden, at the cross, out of the tomb, at the right hand

of the Father, Christ stands alone as a true friend. He alone is worthy of the greatest sacrifice. And yet—and yet!—with this same great sacrifice, he welcomes sinners like you and me back into his worthiness. He is willing to be treated like us—like a criminal (Mark 14:48)—that we criminals might be treated like him.

You know, this isn't the first time the holiness of God ran people out of a garden. In this garden of Gethsemane we see everybody running for their lives, including apparently some young guy who leaves his nightgown to flee the garden naked (vv. 51–52). Back in the garden of Eden, fresh from the fall, having chosen some other treasure over their Lord, Adam and Eve were naked and ashamed, vulnerable. Deserving of the wrath of a holy God. And they were exiled from Eden, sent fleeing from the garden.

But just as the Lord covered Adam and Eve's shame with the skins of sacrifices (Gen. 3:21), he can cover ours with the greater sacrifice of himself.

Our garment of shame becomes Christ's, who bears our shame for us. And Christ's garment of spotless white becomes ours, as our shame has been covered by his righteousness. He does this for all of his lousy friends. Even for Peter the denier.

This is the kind of friend Jesus is. There is none truer. No friend was born for adversity like him. Despite our petty compromises, despite our misplaced passions, despite our frequent lapses into idolatry and our constant trading in of our commitment to him for interest in a million different things nowhere close to worthy of his name, he doesn't call us servants. He calls us *friends*.

What do you suppose we should do with information like that?