

This Week's Theme: Friend of Jesus

This Week's Memory Verse: *You are my friends if you do what I command.*
John 15:14

Monday, April 28

Scripture Reading: John 15:9-17

Who doesn't want friends? As children we love to go play with friends. As teenagers we want to have the most friends and be the most popular kid at school. As adults, it is always nice to have a friend to confide in and enjoy.

Now, what if one of your friends could be Jesus? Seriously, what if Jesus could be one of your best friends – someone to spend time with and enjoy and confide in? Well, not only is that an option, it is an option that Jesus proposes to his followers. Not only does Jesus express His desire to be a friend, he lets us know how to be His friend.

Obedience.

Our passage today shows us how crucial obedience is to our relationship with Jesus. According to Jesus, our obedience:

- Is how we remain in His love (v.10)
- Follows the example of Jesus (v.10)
- Brings Jesus' joy into our lives, and makes our joy complete (v.11)
- Allows us to love each other the way Jesus loves us (because obedience is how we remain in Jesus' love, v.10,12)
- Shows we are friends of Jesus (v.14)

And, as Jesus' friends, we receive everything Jesus has made known, we go and bear lasting fruit as God's chosen, our prayers are answered, and we have within us what we need to fulfill Jesus' command to love each other. So, friends of Jesus make an impact: they touch and change lives, they meet needs, they share love and live lives of joy. In other words, their lives look a lot like Jesus' life.

My parents always warned me that I would act like the people I spent the most time with. Jesus' words suggest they were right. The more I obey, the better friend I become; the better friend I become, the more time I spend with Him; and the more time I spend Him, the more my life looks like His.

What a friend we have in Jesus!

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Tuesday, April 29

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 17:17

The Proverbs are such a rich treasure of wisdom and truth and Godly actions. One topic they speak to often is friendship. Time and again we find verses that describe what real friendship is all about. Since our focus this week is on being a friend of Jesus, the Proverbs will be an excellent source to discover what our friendship with Jesus and others should look like.

Today we are taught that a friend loves at all times. We've known that verse for years, but have you ever really considered what it actually says: a friend loves *at all times*. All the time a friend loves, through all circumstances and feelings, good days and bad. It's a pretty tall order to think about loving anyone in our life that way; it truly is a God-sized task and daily challenge. But our context for the week is Jesus: how do we love Him at all times.

That might actually sound easier since Jesus is not here in flesh and blood to frustrate us the way other flesh and blood people do. But what about the days we doubt? What about the times it feels like God has forgotten us – the times it seems obvious God did not come through? The one we prayed for didn't get better, didn't get saved, didn't get the job – is it easy to love Jesus during those times?

Sometimes it is easy to see and feel God's love, and sometimes we just have to believe. We have to have faith and trust that God is present and does love us and is working things together for good. No wonder without faith it is impossible to please God. And, when you think about it, how can someone who is invisible and spirit be your best friend without a lot of faith and trust on your part?

And aren't you glad Jesus loved us at all times before we were flesh and blood? Aren't you glad He died for us before we were even born? Aren't you glad He didn't wait until we could prove ourselves worthy of His sacrifice, but loved us at all times and gave Himself for us?

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Wednesday, April 30

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 18:24; 17:17

At first glance this proverb looks like it might say you don't want too many friends. But this isn't a rationale for a Christian recluse club (could that even be a club?). The passage says many companions *may* lead to ruin. In other words, the more people around you, the more possibilities you could be led astray (it also means the more chances you have for some wonderful relationships!). The emphasis here seems to be the same found in other proverbs: choose your friends carefully. The contrast to the companions who might bring ruin is the friend who sticks closer than a brother. The Hebrew describes it as one who loves like a brother. It links back to yesterday's verse in 17:17 – the brother who loves even through adversity.

It is hard to stick closer than a brother – I should know. I was one of those little brothers who idolized his big brother. I literally followed Greg around everywhere, doing what he did, saying what he said, imitating his every move. For him it was a terrible annoyance, but I didn't care. I was the Robin to his Batman, Tonto to his Lone Ranger – I stuck *close*.

Of course Jesus is a friend to us who sticks closer than a brother; He is the one who loves at all times, even through our greatest adversity. Perhaps the better way to approach this verse is to ask if I am a friend to Jesus; am I sticking closer to Him than a brother. Do I stick to Jesus the way I stuck to my big brother? Do I follow Him around everywhere, doing what He did, saying what He said, imitating His every move? Do I stick through adversity and love Him at all times, or just when it is convenient or when things are good?

It's an important reminder: the quality of friendship with Jesus is not dependent on whether He will do His part; it depends on whether or not I will do mine. It all goes back to our memory verse – we are His friends when we obey. Thankfully we have Jesus' example to direct us the Holy Spirit to equip us so we can stick close and be like our Brother.

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Thursday, May 1

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 27:6; Ephesians 4:15

Isn't wonderful to get a compliment? Come on, you know you love it – and why shouldn't you? A little flattery is a nice thing, both to give and receive. It's even better when it is sincere! Yes, sometimes flattery is given away cheaply, as a manipulation to get something else. Flattery can come from all kinds of people for all different reasons. It's not wise to base your friendships on who flatters you the most. And you'll never grow as a person if flattery is the only input you ever receive.

One test of true friendship is finding someone who can tell you the truth, good and bad, and still be your friend after they have spoken. That is the best friend to have because they care enough and love enough to help you grow and be your best. So how do you develop that kind of friendship?

It first depends on the one hearing the truth. You have to want to grow and develop and be more like Christ. And the people who can best see things you cannot and offer a word you need to hear are those closest to you. We must have a desire to hear from them and know the truth we seek and hear is both helpful and essential to our growth. Sometimes the truth hurts, but just chalk it up to growing pains.

This kind of friendship also depends on the one telling the truth. They must follow the words of Paul in Ephesians 4:15, where he says we are to speak the truth in love. In doing so, Paul writes that we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head – Jesus. But it must be shared with a motive and tone of love. I have had many people tell me the truth, and, yes, sometimes the truth hurts; but the ones who had my full attention and helped me to grow were the ones who shared that truth out of love for me, not those who came strictly to criticize me.

Jesus is the kind of friend who shares the truth that will make us grow, even if it hurts a little bit. And He speaks that truth to us through His Word. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 reminds us that God's Word encourages us as it teaches and trains us for righteousness, and as it confronts us (ouch!) when it rebukes and corrects. And we need all of those elements to be the person God made us to be. How grateful to have a Friend who truly shares the truth in love.

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Friday, May 2

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 22:11; James 3:1-12

One of the great things about the Proverbs is that they cut right to the chase: no flowery phrases, drawn out metaphors, lengthy illustrations, detailed descriptions that go on and on – oops, sorry, guess I got carried away there.

Today's reading goes right to the heart of the matter. How can I be a friend of the King? That is, after all, the theme of the whole week: being a friend of Jesus. We are told there are two qualities that create and sustain this friendship.

First is one who loves a pure heart. Why does this help you be a friend to Jesus? When you have a pure heart you share Jesus' heart. When Jesus offered up the attitudes He said we are to possess and live at the beginning of His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, He said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." When we possess a pure heart, and love and encourage others who have a pure heart, we see Jesus, in our lives and the lives of others. And the more we see Him, the better we know and love Him.

Second, the one who is a friend of the King has gracious speech. Pure in heart, sure, but why is this the other quality that binds us to Jesus? Just a few chapters earlier we are reminded that our words have the power of life and death (Proverbs 18:21). Our words can be used for good (15:1,7,23; 16:24) or to tear down and destroy (12:22; 16:27-28; 26:21). To be a friend of Jesus means you help spread his love and life, something that cannot be done without gracious speech. James offers a great explanation in James 3:1-12. Take some time to read and reflect on the words he writes.

Oh, to have the King for a friend! The fact that it is even an option is more than we could ever deserve. God, help us possess and love a pure heart; help us to graciously speak words of Your love, so our friendship with you might grow into our most special friendship of all.

What a friend we have in Jesus!

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Saturday, May 3

Scripture Reading: Matthew 9:9-13

We have this habit of having friends that look a lot like we do: same profession, same interests, same color, same denomination, same political party, etc. I think that is largely due to the fact that these are people who are “known” to us: we know what they are like and what to expect from them, and get few surprises. The problem, of course, is that there are so many people we will miss that way. We'll never enjoy the rich tapestry of life God has quilted together if we never leave our little square.

Jesus had all kinds of friends, none of which looked much like Him. He really seemed to have a soft spot for those rejected by society – tax collectors, sinners, and the like. In fact, couple of chapters later in Matthew 11:19, Jesus quotes his enemies, describing how they called him a drunk and glutton and friend of sinners. So what does that tell us?

First, it is a challenge to us: a challenge to diversify and fill our lives with many people, not just a few. It is a challenge to reach out to the least of these, to love the unlovable, to befriend the friendless, to be willing to draw the same kind of fire Jesus did. It is also a challenge to us to be in the world but become worldly. Remember what Jesus prayed for his disciples: not that they would be removed from the world (literally or figuratively), but that instead the Father would protect them from the evil one. If we are to share the love of Jesus with all, we must be friends with more than just those who already love Jesus. We must follow the example of Jesus, who reminds us that He came for the sick, not the healthy, and do so through the protective power of God's Holy Spirit.

But this passage is also a call for us to be grateful recipients of God's love and friendship. We were, after all, the sick Jesus came to save. He loved us and called us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8) so we might find life and purpose and meaning and love and friendship in Him. If Jesus has made that possible for us, shouldn't we, as we live lives of gratitude for Him, do the same for others?

What a friend we have in Jesus!

Sunday, May 4

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.' "

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

Luke 19:1-10