

Christlike Friendships

Luke 5:27-32

Our vision for Faith E-Free involves each of us playing a role in leading others to faith in Jesus Christ. Sometimes people come to Christ independent of the local church, but quite often the church plays a role. For example, we host outreach events such as the Alpha dinner party on Tuesday night. Last month we had a music night to which we encouraged you to invite people. In the future we want to host other events to which you can bring people. These types of events presuppose that we each have non-Christian friends. Unless you know someone fairly well, it's an odd thing to invite them to your church or to some other Christian event.

The reality is that many (if not most) Christians live lives isolated from people who need to know God. Research shows that the longer a person is a believer in Jesus Christ, the fewer and fewer friends that person has outside the church. We all have non-Christian acquaintances, but I'm talking about *friends* who don't yet know God. A friend is somebody that you're genuinely interested in; a friend is somebody you actually let into your life. As hard as it may be to hear, I think that Tom Clegg and Warren Bird are right when they write this in their book *Lost in America*:

When I meet Christians who say they don't have any friends outside the church, I try to ask some probing questions. I usually discover that the reason is not because they're incapable of making friends. Rather, they're misunderstanding the gospel. They're thinking like consumers – it's for *me*, to solve *my* issues, *my* problems, and *my* dysfunctions. They think the point of the gospel is individual – for *my* benefit alone.

The problem for most people is not a lack of social skills but a lack of God's perspective. If we don't have friends outside the church there's something wrong with us – and our version of Christianity. (pp. 134-135)

At one time I would have disagreed with this last statement – that there's something wrong with us and our version of Christianity if we don't have friends outside the church. I would have said that reaching out to people who don't yet know Christ is important for a church and the people within it, but that different churches have different strengths . . . and reaching people for Christ may not be a church's strength.

I've come to the conclusion, though, that if we don't have friends outside the church there is something wrong with us. And what is wrong with us is that ***we are not like Jesus Christ***. One of the most basic things Jesus did was befriend people who were far from God. The accusation was that Jesus was “a *friend* of tax collectors and sinners.” If we would be like Christ, we too will befriend people who need to know God.

Today we are going to look at ***Jesus' Pattern of Befriending People who are Far from God. (Luke 5:27-32)*** I want to emphasize that if we are like Christ, we will be motivated by compassion. Befriending people who need God isn't so much something we *have* to do; it's something we *get* to do because Jesus has befriended us. Through such friendships we are able to give people a deep, honest picture of Christianity that they won't get anywhere else.

In Luke 5:27-32 we have a wonderful account of how Jesus entered into the world of Matthew/Levi the tax collector. Verses 27 and 28 describe how Jesus called Matthew to follow Him.

27 After that He went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow Me." 28 And he left everything behind, and got up and *began* to follow Him.

Tax collectors in Jesus' day were typically Jews who collected taxes for the Roman Empire. As such, they were seen as traitors by the Jews. They were not the type of people good Jews associated with, much less befriended. But Jesus chose Levi (Matthew) to be one of His twelve disciples. I think it's fair to assume that Matthew had had previous encounters with Jesus. Verse 28 tells us that Matthew "left everything behind, and got up and began to follow Him." Matthew literally left his lucrative tax-collecting business and now became a traveling companion with Jesus. This is another example of radical discipleship we see in the gospels.

Apparently nobody told Levi/Matthew, "Hey, since Jesus is a religious guy, you're going to want to compartmentalize your life so that your religious friends and your non-religious friends never see each other. Whatever you do, don't throw a party for your tax collector buddies and invite Jesus. That would be awkward for everybody involved, and it might just give Jesus a bad reputation." Levi didn't get that memo . . .

29 And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other *people* who were reclining *at the table* with them. 30 The Pharisees and their scribes *began* grumbling at His disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?"

Jesus knew what He was doing here. Then as now, "table fellowship" signifies relationship and acceptance. Sharing a meal with others is a significant event. When you enter into someone's house and eat their food, you are entering into their lives and their circle of friendship. Jesus understood this when He accepted Levi's invitation (just as when He accepted Zaccheus' invitation). Jesus was breaking down a barrier that the Pharisees had erected between the righteous and everybody else. This is a key element of spiritual friendships – breaking down barriers that we and others have put between ourselves and those who need Christ. Like Jesus, we aren't so concerned about how we look to other people; what matters is that we reach out to others with compassion.

The Pharisees asked Jesus' disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?" Tax collectors were an identifiable group; that's a fair description. But "sinners" isn't quite such a tight category. Surely the Pharisees had read Isaiah 53 that makes clear that we're *all* sinners. But "sinners" for them meant "really sinful sinners." The problem with designating a group of people as "sinners" is that somebody has to choose which sins are the worst sins. And whoever is choosing the sins certainly isn't going to choose their own sins! When the Pharisees designated people as "sinners," they weren't thinking about sins of pride, hypocrisy, oppression, and legalism (their own sins). They were thinking of other people's sins that were especially offensive to *them*.

How much better for us to think in Isaiah's categories . . . or Paul's categories when it comes to sin: *all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. There's only one category of sinners and we're all in it. If we justify excluding people from our lives because we've designated them or their lifestyle as too sinful, we'll never cultivate the type of spiritual friendships that are their primary hope of knowing God.

Notice that Jesus didn't start backpedaling and saying, "This isn't what it looks like. I don't enjoy being with these people. I didn't realize that this would look so sinful. . . ." No, rather, Jesus cut to the heart of the issue and explained His presence in these terms.

31 And Jesus answered and said to them, "*It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick.* 32 "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

It's as if Jesus, for the sake of discussion, took the Pharisees' categories to make His point. "It's true that these people are sick. But that's exactly why I should be at their dinner party . . . because I am 'the great physician.' That's what physicians do: spend time with sick people." The Pharisees considered themselves righteous, so there was really nothing Jesus could do for them. But the sick – Jesus had something to offer them. Jesus would call them to repentance (to turn *from* themselves and their sin and *to* God).

Jesus' comments in these verses lead us to another important aspect of friendships with people who need to know God. We don't engage in sinful activities so we can relate to people. We are not saying that you should put yourself in situations where you're walking into the jaws of temptation. We each need to know ourselves well enough to know when we're getting into bad situations. The book of Proverbs warns the young, for example, against adopting a foolish, sinful lifestyle. And so "spiritual friendships" should never be used as an excuse for indulging sinful desires. And so if you are young (in years) or young in the faith, you'll want to be very careful here.

Often times – whatever our age or our maturity – spiritual friendships aren't merely one-on-one relationships; spiritual friendships can happen in the context of families and of groups of Christians. Many times the corporate witness is the most powerful. After all, becoming a Christian means become a child of God, which means you are entering into a family. Most people don't want to join a family sight-unseen. This corporate witness is a huge component, for example, of Alpha; people can come and get to know more than just one solitary Christian. They can get a feel for what the Christian life looks like and what Christian community looks like.

But again, most often this introduction into Christian community will begin with your friendship with a person. Occasionally a person will turn to Christ in faith the first time they hear the gospel from a complete stranger; but I most will respond only after seeing the Christian life up-close-and-personal. They can observe it, ask questions about it, and get a feel for it before agreeing, "Yes I would like to experience the life Jesus offers." Without friendships with Christians, people simply don't have the context for understanding and receiving eternal life. David Kinnaman says that it is "like asking a Yankees fan if he or she ever considered pulling for the Red Sox" (*unChristian*, p. 78) They just have no reason for switching their allegiance.

Am I willing to befriend people who are far from God?

My question for you today is, “Would you consider intentionally befriending others who need to know God?” Again, I’m not just talking about being friendly; I’m talking about befriending people – letting them into your life, spending unhurried time with them, being genuinely interested in their lives.

Sometimes I think we make this more complicated than we should. You don’t have to have any complicated strategy; you don’t have to know how it’s all going to turn out. You just have to care deeply about people and wander into a friendship with them. Chances are that it will be awkward at times; it will be a “pain” at times; it will be frustrating at times. But *all* friendships are like that. Our responsibility is to care deeply about people and trust God to do His work in others’ lives.

This is quite different than the way that many Christians think about people without Christ. Some Christians view people without Christ solely in terms of whether or not they are likely to become Christians. In essence they say to people who are far from God, “I’ll be your friend *if* you come to my Christian stuff and if you become like me.” That’s not an honest friendship; and people know it.

The Barna Research Group has done research on what those outside the church think about those inside the church. The results of their research are compiled in a book entitled *unChristian*. The title *unChristian* refers not to people outside the church, but to people inside the church. What they found was that many people outside the church really like Jesus, but they aren’t convinced that church people are very much like Him – hence, their conclusion is that most church people are *unChristian*.

One area in which people outside the church think we’re *unChristian* involves the topic we’ve been discussing today. The Barna Group found that only 34% of those surveyed believe that “Christians genuinely care about them.” But when Christians were asked whether they think people outside the church would say that Christians genuinely care about them, 64% said yes. The relevant thing is that 2/3 of those outside the church don’t think we really care about them.

Part of the problem involves our lack of genuine, honest friendships. Here’s the experience of a thirty-four year old guy who moved to New York from Phoenix. He described how he was initially excited to meet a peer in an unfamiliar city.

“A young guy approached me in a subway station once, friendly, full of questions, interested in talking. He seemed really nice, and I couldn’t believe a New Yorker was being so, well, nice! We exchanged numbers and said we’d hang out sometime. Next time I heard from him, he invited me to a Bible study, and that was all he wanted to talk about. When I said, ‘No thanks,’ I never heard from him again.” Rather than being genuinely interested in people for their friendship, we often seem like spiritual headhunters. (p. 69)

I don’t like pushy salespersons; I don’t like telemarketers who call during supper. I don’t want people to use me. I don’t like people with “an agenda.” I like honest relationships where I can be myself and they can be themselves. So please don’t hear me asking you to *pretend* like you

care about people who are far from God. We are pleading with you to actually care about people. When you care about people, you befriend them.

This week I'd like to encourage you to do some things differently in your routine. I'd like to encourage you to do things that invite friendship. Again, these aren't gimmicks or tricks; when done honestly, these are things that can invite people into friendships. Here are three suggestions:

Take time to notice people. Robynn and Lowell encouraged this last week. Instead of ignoring your neighbors and co-workers and store clerks, begin to notice them. Begin to wonder what type of life they lead. Begin to ask God to give you friendships with some of them. You can probably think of an acquaintance you have right now who could use a good friend.

Ask questions and listen. Christians don't exactly have the reputation for being good listeners. We have the reputation for being judgmental. But ask honest questions about their lives. There may even be opportunities to ask about their faith or their church involvement. Most people aren't so much un-churched as de-churched. You'll be amazed what you learn about people if you ask questions and listen.

Share your life. Of course this will look different for different relationships. Sometimes someone outside the church will ask me, "How are you doing?" and I have to decide whether I'm going to be honest or not. The easiest thing to say is, "Fine, how about you." But I'm not always fine. So sometimes I tell them what I'm going through. When I do, they don't "run for the exits"; they're actually honored that I would trust them with important information in my life. Instead of putting on some type of "good Christian" façade, be honest with people. That's what friends do.

I realize that these things come easier for some of us than others. But be yourself and befriend people. And I'd like to encourage you to begin – if this is new for you – this week. You might evaluate your life and realize, "I don't really have a single non-Christian friend. I've got lots of acquaintances, but no real friends." If two years ago you began to befriend people and asking God to give you friendships, chances are that you'd have several close friendships with people who need to know God. By the grace of God, two years from now we as a church will have hundreds of close friendships with people who need to know God. In that way we'll be a bit more like Christ. And we'll be in a better position to fulfill our mission of helping people come to faith in Jesus and experience God in all of life.