

***Friendship Matters: Honoring God in Our Relationships***  
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One of the most popular and celebrated television sitcoms of the past few decades is a show called “Friends.” Still watched by many in reruns, it follows the life of six twenty-somethings as they set out as friends in search of love and happiness. Their friendships give us a good snapshot of popular culture today. They are in their mid-20s, belong to a single ethnicity, and are part of the upper-middle class. There is little cultural, generational, or religious diversity. Their sexuality is free and open. The life of friendship is portrayed by a good number of laughs peppered with libido. The show highlights the way that friends help us to navigate life, for better or worse, and yet friendship on the show is a concept that is not defined. It is caught, not taught.

Like the television show, many of us are guilty of taking friendship for granted. Most of what we know about it, we assume. When we happen to think about it, we tend to analyze our relationships, lament our loneliness, or believe that our friendships happen by chance. We fail to appreciate fully those whom we consider our friends and what it means for us to call each other “friends.” We see examples in popular culture and wonder if those examples are the kinds of friendships that we should have too. Is friendship, as we experience it, the best it can be?

The claim of this booklet is that friendship is something far more than an afterthought, a side gig, or some frivolous pastime—it is instead a lost art and an underappreciated dimension of the journey to the good life. It is a gift from God that each one of us must act on and receive in order to reap the full blessings that life (both here and on into eternity) has to offer. The deep riches of friendship, particularly Christian friendship, do not happen by chance. They require you to be open to new ideas on friendship and attentive to how they may apply to your life.

Whether our various roles will one day consist of becoming a worker, a parent, a leader, a scholar, or an athlete, we all need friends to share in these experiences and to foster our own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. *While we have all heard that it takes a village to raise a child, many of us need to realize that it takes a community of friends to produce a healthy and whole person.* If, like the authors, you feel that there is something more to living well than our highly individualistic culture would have us believe, then we invite you to join us on this brief journey into why friendship matters and how embracing its truest form can change your life.

## **I. Rediscovering Friendship**

Before we start thinking about the relationships in our own lives, let’s begin by considering the friendships of Olivia, a current sophomore from Chicago attending a small liberal arts school on the east coast. Olivia is very family oriented, doing her best to keep in touch with her parents, four younger siblings, and large extended family. Also back home are her church “family” and her friends from high school. She writes letters and keeps up email chains with some, and has fallen out of touch with others. At school, because Christianity is important to her, Olivia spends a lot of her time with friends who share her faith. Outside of her Christian circle, friends who lived on her floor last year have formed a

“Squad” that meets up for various events and parties, and her roommate often invites her to softball team gatherings. She is also a member of an a cappella group. She babysits every day for two adorable kids. She has five current professors and an advisor. Other individuals she interacts with on a daily basis include custodians who work at her school, the dining hall staff, past professors, the people in her Bible study, her pastor and other families from church, her classmates, and acquaintances from around campus.

Which of the people in her life can Olivia call “friend”? Which of them are Olivia’s closest friends? What are the benefits of friendship in Olivia’s life? Are there different kinds or levels of friendship?

### *The Limits of Friendship*

“The Dunbar Number,” named after sociologist Robin Dunbar, explains that a single person can participate only in a limited number of relationships. At any given time, human beings have a range of possible acquaintances between 100 and 200, with an average maximum of about 150 stable relationships.<sup>1</sup> A “stable relationship” is one that involves people with whom we come into regular contact, recognize by face or name, and interact with at some basic level. They constitute our friendship “circle of influence.” Despite what many of us might think, social media have very little impact on the Dunbar number. We can catalogue our past friendships by “friending” people on social media, but these so-called friendships, and the superficial means we have developed for keeping up with them, do not impact our limitations. Somewhere around the Dunbar total of 150, we become incapable of adding new friendships without letting other friendships go.<sup>2</sup>

Consider the life of a university professor, for example. Over the course of a career, a professor might have more than 200 students in class every year. The professor can try hard to remember their names and keep in contact with them, but the stream of incoming students never ends and the list of former students grows continually. The professor has to make choices about which students will remain on his or her personal and professional radars and which students will disappear into history. The former group will consist of “friends” in the sense that will be defined below. The latter will consist of persons who might make it back into the life of a professor, but for now remain outside the friendship circle. As the example shows, even though our saturation point remains the same, the group of people who constitute our circle of friends is really quite dynamic.

Every one of the 150 persons that make up our full capacity is in some level of friendship with us, but we can take on no more without letting some go. We have only a finite number of friends, close friends, and friendly acquaintances. This makes the task of finding and maintaining our friends quite important. The college experience is rich with opportunities for students to form good friendships. Serving on a college campus also affords faculty and staff a special occasion to build friendships. *The integrated form of life at a typical American college affords the opportunity for students, faculty, and staff to forge some of the deepest, most enduring and life-giving friendships of their lives.* Yet few of us have taken enough time to reflect on the magnitude and meaning of developing these relationships. One of the best things all of us can do is to rediscover the classical understanding of friendship.<sup>3</sup>

## *Aristotle on Friendship*

Even though the famous Greek philosopher Aristotle lived more than 2000 years before the discovery of the Dunbar number, he understood the importance of having friends and wrote extensively on the topic. “Everyone *needs* friends” is the subtext of much of what he has to say on the topic. “For without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods....”<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, like Dunbar, distinguishes between those closest to us and people further removed. “Every form of friendship,” he remarks, “involves association.”<sup>5</sup> Associations come in a variety of forms, but he categorizes them under two broad headings: that of your *close friends* and that of your *regular acquaintances*. According to Aristotle, a person’s inner circle is what he calls “the friendship of kindred and that of comrades,” containing immediate family and best friends.<sup>6</sup> We rely on these people for our emotional, physical, and spiritual needs. The regular acquaintances that fill our lives and populate our wider range of experiences are one’s “fellow-citizens, fellow-tribesmen, fellow-voyagers, and the like.”<sup>7</sup> All of these people matter, thinks Aristotle, because life is dynamic and hard, and times are not always prosperous and full of glee.

Given the harsh realities of life, friendship offers humans some very tangible assistance. According to Aristotle’s extensive discussion of topic, the following benefits of friendship can be observed:

1. It makes life worth living.
2. It provides the opportunity for beneficence.
3. It guards and preserves prosperity.
4. It provides solace in poverty and calamity.
5. It keeps one from error.
6. It supplements the needs of failing abilities of old age.
7. It stimulates noble actions from persons in their prime.
8. It engenders thinking and acting.
9. It connects members of the same species.
10. It binds together travelers.
11. It holds states together.
12. It unifies people in agreement.
13. It expels enemies.
14. It promotes the truest form of justice.
15. It provides proof against slander.<sup>8</sup>

This is an extraordinary list! Friendship can do so much for us that one is hard pressed to overstate its value.

For Aristotle, the value of friendship is not an issue of quantity, but quality. Friendship enhances the quality not only of our life, but also of our dispositions. Honesty, charity, courage, and loyalty are all examples of virtues that good people cultivate and that friendship enhances. Friendship, however, is a special sort of virtue. Think of it as the hub of the wheel of virtue. It allows the other virtues to flourish, unites them together for a common purpose, and offers a corresponding measure of happiness or “justice.” Aristotle describes friendship as a form of practical wisdom that connects the virtues of two persons. In this way, friendship enhances our life and the life of those with whom we come into contact. This is the main reason why Aristotle emphasizes friendship as integral to the quest for personal growth in virtue and the pursuit of the good life.

The pursuit of the good life involves all sorts of friends. Aristotle defines two types of friendship culminating in his discussion of a third—what it means to be good friends. One might think of these three types as levels of friendship that a person might achieve in life. The entry level of friendship is one of pleasure. The next is friendship of utility. The most mature form, for Aristotle, is the good friendship.

### 1. Friendships of Pleasure

The first level of friendship is based on “pleasure.” Typically, people are drawn together because of some pleasure they share in common. Perhaps they have a similar sense of humor, are attracted to each other’s good looks, or enjoy each other’s company because of compatible personalities or interests. Some college students enjoy intramural sports, such as basketball or flag football; others take regular advantage of the local theater options or join the cappella choir. Friends of this sort gravitate towards others with similar interests. These friends help us enjoy life by enhancing the joy that we get out of many different experiences. Pleasure, in this sense, is a core ingredient in a good and happy life. Even though my own pleasure may be a legitimate reason for maintaining a relationship with another person, by seeking my own pleasure as the end of the friendship, I cannot help but turn my friend into a mere means. In this case I am putting myself before my friend. If the immediate pleasure I receive from being in a friendship with another person is the highest good of that friendship, then the friendship will likely not last and, for Aristotle, becomes the lowest kind of friendship.

### 2. Friendships of Utility

The second level of friendship is based on what Aristotle calls “utility.” By this, Aristotle is referring to friendships in which each person helps the other achieve some goal, not because we want to see each other prosper as people, but because of what we hope to get from the relationship. Whereas in the case of pleasure, my friend becomes a means for my own pleasure, in this case my friend becomes a means of attaining some form of practical utility. It is about getting from point A to point B and utilizing the other person to help get me there. Aristotle calls friendships of this type “incidental” because it is not in “being the man he is” that a person is loved but only for use. Such friendships are easily dissolved because the love is easily lost. This is not to say that friendships of utility are inherently bad. We need to get from one place to another and people can help us (and we in turn can help them). Nevertheless, such relationships are always contingent on our current needs, and thus not permanent but prone to the winds of change.

### 3. Good Friendship

The third level of friendship is higher and better than the others. This kind of friendship is based on seeking what Aristotle called “the good.” The good, of course, goes back to Plato. It is the highest form or the source of all that exists. A person is good inasmuch as he or she strives for and thereby participates in the highest good. For Aristotle, good friendship seeks to love another person as a bearer of virtue and as one who is capable of growing in virtue and thus is worthy of happiness. In friendships of this kind, each person seeks the well-being of the other not for the sake of the self, but for the sake of the other. This form of friendship is based on actively loving other people for being who they are and with a view to fostering who they might become. Yet if such goodwill is not received or

returned, goodwill fails to culminate in friendship. Friendship requires a pact between two persons based on goodwill flowing in both directions. Good friendship arises when a relationship gradually forms between two good people who are looking for the highest good for each other and thus choose to inhabit shared environments in order to achieve this end. This type of friendship is rare, for it requires shared time and space, and good people reciprocally committed to loving each other more than themselves.

This three-fold understanding of friendship is neat and tidy. Aristotle understood, however, that these are not rigid categories. Our friendships tend to be a blend of these three categories. Some produce a large measure of utility while only offering a little pleasure, perhaps with a conscious desire to pursue the good of the friend as well. Others provide more pleasure than utility with only a slight concern for developing into a good friendship. There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these sorts of friendships. As long as there is good will they will be oriented in some modest way toward the good. The three distinctions are meant rather to help us to isolate aspects of friendship as we seek the good of one another. As long as we are being friendly in a broad and blended way with one another, all is well on Aristotle's understanding of friendship. Friendship is not a stagnant virtue. We have fun playing a board game with our friends one day, seek their help to move books or furniture on another day, and all the while seek to help our friends and ourselves pursue the good life.

#### *The Limits of Aristotle on Friendship*

Aristotle's notion of friendship has been influential in the history of ideas. As we have seen, there is much that is commendable and worth learning from his writings. At the end of the day, however, what Aristotle and the rest of the ancient philosophers give us is an enlightening but all-too-human understanding of God and God's purpose for humanity. The Greco-Roman philosophers may have "eternity in their hearts" (Eccl. 3:11), but their conception of the highest good as the end to which all human activity should be directed is too vague. Bald philosophical theism is not enough. Yes, Aristotle sees all virtue as directed, knowingly or unknowingly, to the divine. However, Aristotle's notion of God, what it means to contemplate God, and what kind of happiness God produces in us are lacking in definition and ultimately unsatisfying.

God's historical self-revelation, recorded in the Bible, laid the foundation for a particularly Christian account of God that filled the need for a clear sense of the highest good for early Christians. Christians, in reading the Bible, believe in salvation history, which culminates in the second coming of Christ, at which time all believers throughout history will be reunited in perfect fellowship with God. Many early Christians combine this biblical understanding of God and history with the ancient philosophical notions of happiness and the highest good to describe the Christian life as a journey of being gradually configured to Christ until he returns one day to bring his followers into perfect union with the triune God.<sup>9</sup>

## II. Redeeming Friendship

Every person in the college or university setting will have a different experience of friendship. Of all Olivia's relationships at school, it happens that only her Christian friends talk about the idea of friendship. At the beginning of freshman year, she formed relationships with her floor mates and other people with whom she shared interests. They didn't talk about becoming friends; it just happened. When Olivia grew apart from some of them between semesters, it wasn't an issue. Among the Christian freshmen girls, friendship was very intentional. They organized a testimony sharing night in order to get to know one another, exchanged contact information, and met weekly for prayer. It was assumed that they would all know each other and continue to stay in touch, regardless of scheduling or personality differences. With Olivia's non-Christian friends, rifts have ended in split friend groups or people who don't work to solve their differences. However, in the Christian fellowship, any conflict is automatically seen as a problem for the entire group and addressed immediately as a threat to friendship within the group at large. While no one story is normative or representative (and many will have had experiences that are quite the opposite of Olivia's), Olivia's experience of Christian friendship provides a useful example.

In this case, what might be the motivation for Olivia and her Christian friends to be more intentional in their cultivation of friendship than her non-Christian friends? What is the appropriate goal of a God-honoring friendship? Are there any examples we can learn from to teach us how to have the most fulfilling friendships?

### *The Two Greatest ... Friendships*

While Aristotle provides the framework underlying much of ancient thinking about friendship, Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) brings the best of classical and the best of Christian insights on the topic into profound unity. Augustine's approach to friendship gives a Christian twist to Aristotle's third type of friendship. He speaks more concretely about the nature of the highest good, the source of lasting human happiness. According to Augustine, friendship is most meaningful and prosperous not just when it is ordered toward virtue or the benefit of others and ourselves, but when it is also directed toward what Augustine understands to be the highest good, namely, the God revealed in Jesus Christ. This leads us to two primary distinctions between Augustine and Aristotle.

First, Augustine understood that for friendship to be ordered toward the Christian God would require more than ancient philosophy had to offer. Although Augustine reports in the *Confessions* that reading the books of the Platonists around the age of 30 had a significant role in helping him to come to his Christian faith, "that 'the word was made flesh and dwelt among us' (Jn. 1:13-14), [he] did not read there."<sup>10</sup> What even the Platonists could not overcome was the sinful pride of believing they could participate in God without the grace and mediation of God in Christ. Augustine argues that through his humble sacrifice on the cross, Christ accomplished the salvation of his followers, which is worked out through the work of the Holy Spirit to conform the believer into Christ, the image of God.

Second, in his most important work, *City of God*, Augustine explains the inadequacy of earlier philosophical notions of friendship like Aristotle's that do not

culminate in an eternal friendship with God. He recognizes that philosophers arrive at some truths, such as the creation of the world by God, “the nobility of virtue[s],” or “love of country and loyalty in friendship.”<sup>11</sup> However, he expresses his concern that “they were ignorant of the end to which all these were to be referred and the standard by which they were to be assessed.”<sup>12</sup> *In other words, ancient philosophers, including Aristotle, Cicero, and many others, failed to understand that a loving relationship with God is the ultimate purpose and end by which love of others is given lasting significance.*

After pointing out the failure of a purely philosophical approach to friendship, Augustine contends that Christian Scripture reveals that friendship with God the Father, which can only be obtained through the forgiveness and mediation of Christ, is the highest good. But before explaining exactly what Augustine means, we have to understand a couple other important assumptions he makes. The first is that Augustine did not accept that contemplating God as the highest good would itself lead human persons to virtue and happiness. Human desires are misdirected and, according to Augustine, people are unable to correct them by themselves. Second, for Augustine, happiness is not perfect unless it has the built-in guarantee that it will not fail or collapse. Perfect happiness, the best that we can wish for a person, is not transient or finite, but consists in an eternal relationship with God. Matthew Levering provides a helpful sketch of this concept when he writes that “[f]riendship can be enduring only when our relationship to our human friends is caught up in our relationship to God.”<sup>13</sup> It is only on the other side of Christ’s second coming and the divine judgment, in the direct presence of God, that Augustine believes people can be truly and finally satisfied in unremitting joy. In this way, Augustine’s vision for the Christian life culminates in friendship of the most profound and lasting kind, namely, with the Triune God.<sup>14</sup>

In the tenth book of *City of God*, Augustine unpacks his understanding of Christian friendship in terms of what Jesus calls the two greatest commandments:

We are commanded to love this Good with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength; and to this Good we must be led by those who love us, and to it we must lead those whom we love. Thus are fulfilled those two commands on which “all the Law and the prophets depend”: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind,” and, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” For in order that a man may know how to love himself an end has been established for him to which he is to refer all his action, so that he may attain to bliss. For if a man loves himself, his one wish is to achieve blessedness. Now this end is “to cling to God.” Thus, if a man knows how to love himself, the commandment to love his neighbor bid him to do all he can to bring his neighbor to love God. This is the worship of God; this is true religion.<sup>15</sup>

For Jesus, Augustine, and the Christian, we must be lovers of God and lovers of others. As with loving ourselves, loving another person means loving them in such a way that they will love God and thereby put their future hope in eternal life with God. This is Augustine’s central insight. He integrates the philosophical tradition of loving others for the sake of the good with the heart of the Christian faith, loving God and loving others.

Augustine’s emendation of Aristotle on friendship is that our friendships should have as their primary aim leading others and ourselves to eternal life in communion with God. The truest form of friendship will account for both the horizontal and the vertical planes. Our vertical friendship with God organizes our horizontal friendships with others.

As we begin and participate in friendships with people, the things we do together and the ways we relate to one another ought to be aimed at helping the other person grow in faith, hope, and love. As we configure our lives to the shape of Christ's life, seeking to know and love God more each day, friendship consists in seeking the same growth for our friends, whether they love God or we hope they will come to love God. For Augustine, the context of the community of friends working together to cultivate love for God is always the church.

While Augustine identifies some higher goods to be used and enjoyed, such as health, wisdom, and friendship, there is a single object of true enjoyment, for the sake of which we make good and proper use of created objects.<sup>16</sup> This single object is the triune God who through the Son and the Spirit enables us to know and love God in this life so that we can see God in the next.<sup>17</sup> Just as we use study and learning to enjoy wisdom, we use friendship to enjoy God. For Augustine, to sin is to prioritize a lower good (e.g., a creature) over a higher good (e.g., the Creator), for example, to put study above wisdom or friendship above God. Even more, while Augustine says that we ought to use things "to help and sustain us as we move toward blessedness," he does not—and cannot—mean that in the context of friendship we should use another person in a destructive fashion.<sup>18</sup> In loving God we cannot abuse or otherwise harm someone. When the manner of use is destructive, the true object being sought cannot be good. Just as cheating on an exam is not seeking to enjoy wisdom, so too causing harm to a friend is not seeking to enjoy God.

Augustine offers at least three modes of Christian friendship that make important strides beyond the work of Aristotle. First, there is the form of Christian friendship in which we treat others in a friendly manner, loving them the best way we can to help them grow in their knowledge of and love for God. Such relationships are usually with people who are not in our inner circle because more often than not our love is not reciprocated, at least not in a way that helps us grow in faith, hope, and love.

The second form of Christian friendship is between two people invested in seeking God together by clinging to each other in love while also helping each other cling to God in love. This is the Christian form of what Aristotle called "good friendship" in that its principle aim is to love one another in preparation for life with God. At their best, these friendships will be transformative and life-changing. The best of Christian marriages will function this way.

The final form of Christian friendship is the true end of the Christian life, namely, friendship with God. This is the natural relationship of creatures to their God, but due to the fall we scorn God until he moves in us by his Holy Spirit to produce a love and desire for Himself. This love and desire grows as the Christian matures over time, yet always competes with created goods until Christ's return at which time believers will be ushered into God's presence and the friendship will be perfected in that we will finally love God as God and he will be our all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).

### *A Biblical Account of Friendship*

While in many ways unique to him, Augustine derives his theology of love from the teachings of Jesus.<sup>19</sup> Jesus provides the paradigm of friendship with God and with others in giving his summary of the Law and the Prophets in the form of the Two Greatest Commandments (Matt. 22:37-40). As with Augustine after him, Jesus communicates an ordered relationship between love of God and others, with love of God taking priority in that



as we love God, we also love the things God has made because God has made them. While we are created to love and worship our Creator God, genuine love for God cannot be separated from love for what he has created (cf. 1 Jn. 3:17), just as faith cannot truly flourish without works (Jas. 2:14-26). The two are in Jesus' teaching united together and, while distinct, must always remain together.

While love is the vocation of every Christian disciple, the only perfect love consists in the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus speaks to the unity of his relationship, in being and will, with the Father (Jn. 10:30), an eternal communion that also extends to the Holy Spirit. In the NT, however, Jesus draws an explicit comparison between his relationship to the Father and the relationship of Christians to each other. In the Upper Room discourse of the John's Gospel (Jn. 13-17), Jesus prays and exhorts his disciples to share unity, that is to be one with each other as he and the Father are one (Jn. 17:11, 20-23). So there is no perfect horizontal friendship in Scripture other than the relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet this friendship is of a different order, for while Father, Son, and Holy Spirit love each other perfectly, they are divine persons loving in transcendent triunity. Beyond saying we want to know and to love each other in perfect unity as do the three Persons of the godhead, the way they love does not provide an example that applies directly to our human situation.

We can, however, learn from examples of love and friendship shown throughout the biblical narrative, which culminate with Jesus' friendship to his disciples, a foreshadow of the church in which Christian friends are to love one another and God. Before exploring these examples, it will be helpful at this stage to provide working definitions of love and friendship as we are using the terms. What we have learned from the ancients and the early Christians alike is that true friendship will require the shared object of love to be worth loving and the only qualified object worth loving is God. Thus, while *love* is the desire of the whole person either for God or for some created good that is in keeping with loving God, *friendship* arises as a dynamic relationship between two people whose love for each other has been caught up in a shared love for God or for some created good that is in keeping with loving God.

The Bible provides many examples of people loving others and seeking friendship for the sake of eternal communion with God. Each one points a way forward for Christians today by offering important lessons from friends and friendships in the biblical witness. In each example noted below, the relationship is defined by a shared love for God. Yet each instance displays a diversified set of benefits that can emerge from good Christian friendships. Not all circumstances and the relationships that develop out of them are the same. The way one friend helps to sustain your love for God will look different than the way another friend does. One may help you better understand God through biblical teaching. Another friend may help you to love God more in helping you deepen your prayer life. The following is a sampling of biblical friendships that exhibit the conditions and consequences of godly and Godward friendship.

### *1. David and Jonathan: Putting God First*

The relationship between David and Jonathan, the son of King Saul, is an instructive friendship in the Bible. Loyalty, love, and faithfulness characterize their friendship. As we read in 1 Sam. 18:3: "Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as

himself.” John Woodhouse makes the same point: “Saul’s son, Jonathan, was the best friend David had in the world.”<sup>20</sup>

Saul is the King of Israel and progressively becomes more paranoid as his jealousy for God’s blessing grows over time. At a dramatic moment in their story, Saul chases after David, God’s newly anointed, with the explicit intention of killing him to avoid being replaced. Jonathan finally sees proof of his father’s intention to kill David in 1 Sam. 20:32-33 when Saul attempts to kill David by the spear. At a time of great conflict and at great risk to his own position, Jonathan chooses to give his love and support to David, rather than to his father, King Saul. When he evaluates his predicament, he sees that all the evidence points to David, and not his father, as the one following the will of God.

So Jonathan puts his friend before his wayward father and king (1 Sam. 20). Francesca Murphy captures the nature of Jonathan’s act of what she calls “friendship love”: “‘Friendship love’ is about seeing or caring about ‘the same truth’ above and outside both parties...The Lord is the same truth that David and Jonathan share...What holds David and Jonathan together, the true covenant binding them, is their God: ‘Behold, the LORD is between you and me forever’ (20:23 ESV).”<sup>21</sup> Friendship is a two-way street. On the one hand, Jonathan helps David in a display of loving friendship, but on the other, David is helping Jonathan to escape the grasp of his wayward father.<sup>22</sup> Inasmuch as this is the case, Jonathan’s courageous love for David is an example of what friends can accomplish when their love for one another is caught up in their love for God. The “same truth” that binds two people together in friendship, which Murphy identifies as “above and outside,” is God. .

## *2. Paul and Barnabas: For the Sake of the Gospel*

The relationship between Paul and Barnabas is famous for coming to an impasse that forced them to make a difficult decision about how best to proceed in their ministry. Paul meets Barnabas not long after converting to Christianity on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–19). Barnabas, the senior and more experienced Christian evangelist, incorporates Paul into his ministry to the church in Antioch. They set out on journeys together across the Mediterranean for the purpose of preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Some time after working to limit the number of requirements placed on newly converted Gentiles at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-35), Paul and Barnabas decide to revisit the churches to which they had previously preached. The two evangelists disagree over whether to include John Mark in this, their second missionary journey. While it might be easy to dismiss these two first-century men for what seems to be a petty disagreement, the matters at hand are not trivial.<sup>23</sup> Paul and Barnabas held strong and diverging positions about John Mark—Paul that he had proven unreliable and Barnabas that he showed promise in proclaiming the Gospel. They both, however, felt the great calling of God to spread the Good News in the most effective way possible. While according to Acts 15:39, the disagreement itself is the reason for their separation, one can surmise that accompanying this cause was their concern for well-being of their Gospel ministry.

Paul and Barnabas’ friendship was so centered on serving God’s kingdom that even when they went separate ways they found a way to ensure the success of their evangelistic mission (Acts 15:36–41). The episode does not state whether their parting of ways signifies the end of their friendship, nor does it mean that Christian friends should divide or split up every time they have a ministry disagreement. The source of conflict needs to be

determined, for there are honorable and dishonorable reasons for which people can separate, just as there are different degrees of separation.<sup>24</sup> Separation is more the exception than the rule. Doing God's kingdom work, when called, is a sufficient reason to take decisive action between friends. Our shared love for God is the highest good that orders the decisions we make within our friendships.

### *3. Paul and Timothy: Serving the Church*

Paul and Timothy share a friendship in which Paul is the mentor to Timothy, his ministry protégé. Paul loved Timothy as a father loves a son and Timothy loved Paul as his own father. The two were in an ordered teacher-student relationship, yet an intimate one in which Paul and Timothy loved each another as brothers in Christ. Paul's and Timothy's mutual care for Christ's church is the driving force of their relationship even to the point of Paul leaving Timothy in charge of the church of Ephesus while he moves on to continue advancing the ministry of the Gospel (1 Tim. 1:2-3; 2 Tim. 3:10-11; Rom. 16:21). The friendship begins with a sense of common purpose, but flourishes when both the student and the teacher are able to love each other in such a way that their friendship recognizes the greater purpose of the kingdom of God.

### *4. Ruth and Naomi: Perseverance and Commitment*

People need the presence and love of others in their darkest hours. Friendship is often one of the most important means for sustenance in times of difficulty. The bond of friendship can outlast the harshest trials. The narrative of the book of Ruth begins with the death of all the men of a family, leaving the matron Naomi and her two daughters-in-law to fend for themselves in a patriarchal society in which widows without family support were usually destitute. Ruth, the daughter-in-law and Naomi, her mother-in-law, endure tremendous suffering in the death of their loved ones and in the ensuing conditions of their lives. Naomi was far from home in Moab and both her daughters-in-law were without husbands. Not surprisingly, they were unsure how to proceed.

Throughout the story, Ruth and Naomi's devotion to the Lord and their commitment to one another enable them to endure desperate circumstances in a God-honoring way. For example, when Naomi determines to return to Judah and release Ruth and Orpah to their parents so that they can remarry, "Ruth's strong character is shown in her insistence to stay with Naomi and also in Naomi's realization that there was no point in arguing with Ruth."<sup>25</sup> Ruth shows commitment, perseverance, and initiative as she seeks to be a friend to Naomi and a faithful servant of God.

While Ruth remains steadfast throughout the narrative, Naomi only gradually comes to realize the significance of Ruth's commitment to her. She nearly fails to understand the love Ruth has for her and the friend Ruth has been to her. The uncertainty of her future and the grave doubt she experienced clouded her vision so that she was not able to see that in the aftermath of losing her husband and sons, God was loving her through Ruth.<sup>26</sup>

The story of Ruth's and Naomi's relationship shows that loving a person with self-abandon can lead to perseverance through suffering and even a kind of personal renewal. Ruth's constant, though at times unreciprocated, love shows how being a friend to someone

without requiring love from them can change that person's life and contribute to engendering their love for God.

### *5. Mary and Martha: Keeping Right Focus*

Mary and Martha, sisters of Lazarus and friends of Jesus, are depicted in the Gospels as living together in Bethany near Jerusalem (Jn. 11:1). In Luke 10, Jesus and his disciples pay them a visit. The response of the two women to Jesus' presence among them is strikingly different. While Mary focuses all her attention on Jesus and his teaching, Martha prioritizes her role as a host, placing the impressions and comfort of her guests before her love for God.<sup>27</sup> The point is not that hospitality is unimportant. Martha's mistake is that she puts the lower good of hosting above the highest good, God. On the other hand, seeking the kingdom of God by reclining at the feet of Jesus is Mary's way of putting her love for God before her concern for temporal goods such as hosting and hospitality. While Jesus is not telling Martha not to serve her neighbors in love; he is teaching her that she is called to love God first, to love her Creator and Lord before his creatures and creation.

Jesus calls out the difference between Mary and Martha in an instructive fashion. He tells Martha not to worry about such things but to follow the example of her sister Mary (Lk. 10:41–42).<sup>28</sup> Mary exemplifies for her sister what it looks like to keep one's focus on Jesus. Jesus helps Martha to see this by pointing to Mary's example. Many pastors have rightly called their people to live like Mary, but too often they fail to appreciate that we are all like Martha in that we need to follow the example of a Mary. If we are careful enough to slow down, avoid the distractions, and see our fellow Christians sitting at the feet of Jesus, our love for God too will be kindled.

### *6. Jesus and the Disciples: Holistic Godward Friendship*

Of the biblical characters that have the power to teach Christians about friendship, the most exemplary friend in the Bible is Jesus. Jesus' relationship with the Father demonstrates the perfect, paradigmatic friendship; his close relationship with the disciples has put true Christian friendship on display for Christians throughout history. In John 15:14–17, Jesus says to his disciples, “You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you... This is my command: Love each other.”

Jesus' words to his disciples demonstrate that Jesus has been a friend to his disciples all along. He has taught and loved them in such a way as to lead them to his Father in heaven. Jesus shows what it means to love others unto God by how he loves his disciples, but that he calls them his friends reveals his intentional gift of sharing his humanity with the disciples in a way that no other Christians will experience this side of heaven. Implicit in the conditional element of Jesus' initial declaration—“if you do what I command”—is the fact that to be a friend of Jesus requires obedience, for he is God. In a similar way, being a true Christian friend requires faithfulness and service to God, the expression of love for God in action. To be a friend with the living God requires a genuine life of faith and obedience.

Jesus' friendship with the disciples provides two chief lessons for the Christian. First, Jesus displays varying degrees of intimacy and closeness between him and his friends.

As with all people, Jesus shows how every person develops an inner circle of friends or closest companions. The innermost circle is set within a larger group of concentric circles. For Jesus, this inner circle consists of Peter, James, John, his mother Mary and possibly Mary Magdalene. The next circle consists in the twelve disciples whom Jesus brings along from their initial calling onward. The third level consists in the people represented in various episodes within the Gospels. Think of people like John the Baptist, Lazarus, or Zacchaeus. The fourth circle might include portions of the crowds that came to listen to Jesus' teaching and to observe his miracles. While Jesus is a friend to people in every circle in that he loves them so that they will respond with love for God, his relationship to the disciples and his inner circle bears the most fruit.

The second lesson is how Jesus calls his disciples into friendship first by telling them to follow him. This call is something unique. The disciples consider Jesus the Lord, but during their time with him they did not fully understand that their "friend" is actually God incarnate. Unfortunately, because of the finitude, sinfulness, and immaturity of the disciples, it took until after Jesus' death and resurrection for them to recognize Jesus' divinity and therefore to love him as God. At one level, of course, the friendship between Jesus and his disciples cannot be perfectly reciprocal: they are his "friends," he insists, only if they do whatever he commands them (14:15; 15:14), and the reverse cannot be true. At another level, Jesus is the best possible friend, such that while the disciples do their best to love Jesus, it is Jesus' example of how to be a friend that offers the deepest insight into friendship. Through the many lessons Jesus teaches the disciples and the many encounters by which they grow closer to each other, Jesus shows what it means to do all things to foster the love of God above all else and love of neighbor as the second greatest commandment.

Jesus' friendliness to others and his friendship with the disciples form the finest examples of how to be a friend. However, the insights gained from considering Jesus' life and other biblical examples of friends and friendship are complemented by combining them with practical considerations pertaining to friendship in today's world. For this reason, the remainder of this piece applies insights from classical, Christian, and biblical teaching on friendship to the different kinds of friendship experienced by young people today.

### **III. Rehearsing Friendship**

While each of Olivia's friendships is an important contribution to her well being and walk with the Lord, they are also strikingly different from one another. The way she relates to her teachers and employers, for example, will be different than the way she relates to other students. However, even among her peers, each of her relationships is unique. Each of her peer-to-peer friendships has a role to play in her relationship with God. The same is true of the friends in your life.

In the final section of this essay, we will offer some brief reflections on four kinds of relational contexts for flourishing friendship. These discussions are not meant to be the final word on such relationships. They are instead signposts to help us navigate the fast changing social and cultural norms in a Christ-honoring way and in full awareness of the importance of friendship for all human beings in the world today.

*Friendships with People Like Us: Fighting the Temptation to Idolatry*

People tend to develop friendships with others most like themselves whether the similarity consists in culture, values, interests, desires, ethnicity, vocations, or beliefs. The familiarity resident in the similarities two friends share is often quite pleasant and fulfilling. However, the comfort that familiarity affords can subtly mislead a person away from God. When the point of commonality becomes something other than Christian unity oriented toward loving God, temptation may trigger sin, for the sinful human habit is to elevate above the Creator temporal goods that are more immediately satisfying. For example, sometimes our shared joy for sport or entertainment overshadows our shared love for God.

It is important that people who enjoy similar activities enjoy the shared activity while not letting it overwhelm and crowd out their calling to love each other unto God. The comfort a person can experience in sharing similarities comes with the advantage that these relationships are easy to initiate and maintain. Yet such a relationship also bears the potential downside of distracting both people from their search for happiness in eternal life with God, which they ought to be seeking as individuals and as friends. The distraction consists in mistaking the comfort and joy of the present for the final, usually in a subconscious way. We are lulled into being satisfied with the way things are now rather than living rightly as pilgrims on the way to a better place. Even though we may love our family portrait, it will remain an incomplete picture without the life that comes with knowing God.

On the face of it, many of our most rewarding relationships with people like us occur without any agreement in the area of beliefs. Our experience and time together form a bond that appears unbreakable. But this perception is more impressionistic than realistic, for it fails to recognize that these relationships have achieved their fullness and do not offer a lasting source of happiness. We love and enjoy that friend, but what does it amount to? Where does it lead us? We may “live, laugh, and love,” a phrase fashionable in American home decor, but without faith, hope, and love in God, death will surely get the last laugh. This is not to reduce this life to nothing, but to put it into perspective: “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever” (Isa. 40:8; cf., Ps. 90:4; 2 Pet. 3:8-9). Although we may more naturally build rapport with people like us in ways unrelated to our beliefs, the relationships with the greatest potential are with people who share, or come to share, our desire for eternal life with God. In short, two are indeed better than one, but two are best only when they are together oriented toward God.

Olivia has some friends with shared interests and others with shared beliefs. Despite Camila moving across town, she and Olivia remain friends because they often have Spanish classes together and attend the Latin American heritage affinity group weekly. Their friendship centers around shared experiences. Camila is not a Christian, and sometimes when she’s going through a tough week Olivia struggles to know how to be a good friend to her without being able to bring up the beliefs and practices of her Christian faith as an encouragement. They have formed a close bond with which many of us can relate, but Olivia is forced to approach Camila without her entire self, because she has a hard time deciding how to bring her Christian identity to bear on the relationship. Either she shares her faith and the hope it bears, but risks upsetting her friend, or she eschews her faith and gives her friend encouraging words that don’t represent what she believes is the heart of the matter.

Michele and Olivia first became close last year when Olivia felt convicted by God to confess some struggles she was going through. One night, she abruptly confided in Michele, another Christian, and Michele reciprocated. They decided to enter into an accountability

relationship, and ever since that day they have been meeting weekly. They have a “no secrets” policy; over the course of their relationship they have shared with each other more of their struggles and become more comfortable calling one another out on sin and poor judgment. They never meet without praying. While Olivia and Michele share some interests, they are not the driving force of the friendship; their friendship does not depend on their shared interests persisting. The bond their shared faith creates between them enables them to love each other without reserve and with reference to an unending future happiness together in the Lord.

### *Friendships with People Unlike Us: Fighting the Temptation to Homogeneity*

Life in today’s world will not allow us to spend all of our time and invest all of our energy in people just like us. Globalization is reducing the amount of homogenous space in the world. To live in spaces filled with different kinds of people and yet practice relational homogeneity is to miss out not only on an opportunity for personal growth and development, but also on the opportunity to love indiscriminately our neighbors as ourselves. Building relationships with people who are different than we are teaches us about ourselves and helps us to love others as they want to be loved. Although it can be difficult to initiate and maintain a relationship with someone whom we find to be different than we are, every Christian should endeavor to do so.

Difference comes in a variety of forms. People have different cultures, ethnicities, values, interests, desires, or beliefs. Unfortunately, we bring cultural and experiential baggage to relationships involving such differences because we are all working with assumptions and stereotypes we have made about people unlike ourselves. For this reason, many people become resigned to thinking that difference presents barriers that are more troublesome than rewarding. The prospect of visiting a church with a more charismatic or liturgical approach than any church you have attended, or entering into conversation with a person from a different part of the world and with a different skin tone can initially be a jarring and uncomfortable experience. Differences, even of these basic sorts, can lead to suspicion, alienation, or indifference. But the Christian is called to love others without playing favorites or being judgmental, particularly when these decisions are based on superficial similarities or worldly interests.

In twenty-first century America, the situation is exacerbated by political correctness and extreme sensitivity to difference. Particular differences are identified and dealt with only with great caution. These cultural landmines include differences of religion, race, socio-economics, politics, and sexual ethics. Christians are called to be witnesses to the truth, and therefore must be intentional in befriending people unlike themselves, bridging the gap that difference creates. Rather than putting aside difference by faking similarity, the Christian must learn to appreciate the other person *in* the differences, rather than *despite* these differences. The first step in bridging such differences is to bring people with opposing viewpoints together into the same space, forcing them to move beyond the impersonal polarization of the other. The liberal and the conservative, the #blacklivesmatter and the #bluelivesmatter proponents, the Christian heterosexual and the unbelieving homosexual, the rich and the poor all need to learn from one other. The mature Christian should not bury his or her head, but must hear the convictions of others and not only and always to dig our heels in deeper.

People coming together across difference too often attempt to emphasize their similarities and downplay their differences without a concern for the integrity of the other person in his or her distinctive qualities. Often loving a neighbor with whom we share little will require us to learn how to love them in the areas of difference where it is more difficult and less natural. Yet it remains essential in building a friendship with someone who is different from ourselves that we spend time learning how to love them in such a way that they will see Christ in us and thus be more likely to turn to Christ in love, whether or not they already know and believe in him.

Differing beliefs present a unique set of challenges for Christians. When Christians relate to someone of differing beliefs, they are called to love the other for who he or she is, yet still in the hope that the person will come to know and love Christ. In other words, there is a conflict of commitments that requires the Christian to be mindful of people holding to other beliefs, but also to maintain the conviction that to love such people as friends still requires loving them so that they will come to love God. Even more, Christians are called to befriend people holding different beliefs without expecting friendliness in return. While we will appreciate another person more if they reciprocate our expression of love for them, their reciprocation should not be a condition of our love for them. We also need to be careful that when we invest in relationships with the unbelieving, we are not conforming to their way of living. We have all felt the weight of being influenced by an unbelieving friend rather than having a positive influence on them. When sin enters, it perverts our relationships.

Consider Olivia's relationship with Aisha. Olivia met Aisha when they lived on the same floor freshman year. Even though Aisha has since become good friends with her intramural sports teammates, she and Olivia try to meet up regularly to stay updated on each other's lives. They skip the small talk and go straight to, "How are you *really* doing?" Recently, Olivia decided to ask Aisha how she was doing with some anti-Muslim sentiments on campus and in the country at large. The topic has been a little awkward between them because Olivia knows that Aisha is Muslim, and Aisha knows that Olivia is Christian. When Olivia checked in with Aisha about this issue, it cleared the way for a larger conversation about religion and spirituality. It was a step forward for their relationship that they were able to talk about important points of difference that are taboo for many others at their school.

For the Christian to love non-Christians in a God-honoring way is to love them so that they will come to love God. However, this will look different in differing circumstances; some people need more truth and others more love. We need not assume that every moment should consist in trying to convert our unbelieving friends, but nor should we fail in cowardice to share the good news of Jesus Christ with them.<sup>29</sup>

### *Friendships of Hierarchy*

In many relationships, the people involved have different roles that have unequal levels of authority and power. One person is a subordinate and the other a superior. This difference may center on position, skill, morality, or some other value that structures the relationship. Although some will equate power structures to evil, because Christians worship an all-powerful God who exerts his power in a just manner that accords with his love and goodness, we understand power as not itself evil, but in need of being properly ordered to justice.



When the more powerful person in a relationship that involves hierarchy treats the other with true justice and unconditional love, the power dynamics will not cause harm, but will instead ensure the flourishing of both people. When the less powerful person in a relationship of hierarchy treats the other with love regardless of the other's possible mismanagement of power, the subordinate person has an opportunity to love the person of greater authority with the self-less love of a Christian friend. To be sure, there are hierarchical relationships in which friendship is not possible or at least not recommended.

Family and the community are the two most common areas in which hierarchical relationships are found. Regarding family, there are two examples worth considering. Christian marriage is the first example of a hierarchical relationship that can culminate in friendship. Augustine, in *The Good of Marriage*, argues that God created humanity out of Adam because of the nature of human persons as social beings. In the course of his discussion, Augustine suggests on the basis of the "first natural link" between Adam and Eve (Adam's rib) that marriage is "a true union of friendship between the two sexes, with the one governing and the other obeying."<sup>30</sup> While Augustine sees a stronger ordering between husband and wife than many today would be comfortable with, he is the first ancient writer to elevate Christian marriage to the status of true friendship, which for Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, among others, was reserved for two *men* of virtue.<sup>31</sup> Augustine maintains, as does Paul, that marriage is an ordered relationship of equals. Yet men and women, while equal in God's and each other's eyes, are different (Eph. 5:21-33).

A second example is the parent-child relationship, which comes with the built-in expectation that the parent instructs and leads the child, while the child follows and respects the parent. The power dynamics will shift in the course of life, but each is called to love, honor, and respect the other while also helping the other to foster a deeper love for God (cf., Eph. 6:1-4; Col. 3:18-21; Ruth).

Within our communities, schools present a number of hierarchical relationships. Perhaps the most important is the teacher and student relationship. These relationships are often incidental where information, expertise, or skills are transmitted from the teacher to the student. Teachers should respect the office of "teacher," for they will be held to a higher standard (Jms. 3:1). Students need to respect those who fulfill the office as well. The Bible implies a responsibility to live faithfully in the role to which God has assigned you, whether as a teacher or as a student (cf. 1 Cor. 10:31).

A mentor-protégé relationship can involve a parent, a neighbor, or coach. Ordered relationships usually bring different kinds of benefits to each person, such as influence to the superior and learning to the subordinate. Paul and Timothy offer a good example of this kind of relationship. Paul teaches Timothy about how to lead the church and grants him significant leadership opportunities. Yet Paul also benefits a great deal from his time with Timothy and by watching Timothy faithfully seek the Lord (cf., Rom. 16:2; 1 Thess. 3:2; Phil. 2:2; 1 Tim. 1:2-3; 2 Tim. 3:10-11). If the relationship is designed for Christian discipleship, the subordinate needs to remember that the superior too is a disciple and a human one at that.

All of these positions of authority come with the caveat that we are assuming just and moral behavior on the part of both parties. To the extent that these fundamental truths of the human condition are transgressed, the rules of hierarchy become corrupt and apply differently. Superiors in ordered relationships must take seriously their position of power in the relationship and take care not to take advantage of that power in a way that is harmful to

the subordinate in the relationship. Subordinates in ordered relationships need to remember the humanity of their superiors and that a strength in one area of influence might be offset by weakness in another. Both people need to be discerning.

### *Friendships with the Opposite Sex*

Relationships with people of the opposite sex typically have two practical types—just friends and friends with the possibility of a more romantic relationship (boyfriend or girlfriend). In “just friends” relationships, the boundary of a good friendship with the opposite sex is transgressed when there is emotional transference that leads to an expression of romantic intimacy when the terms of the relationship were never meant to be romantic. Romantic intimacy requires the express consent of both people in the relationship. The spirit is willing to follow God’s will and stay the course despite temptation, but the flesh is weak (Matt. 26:41). The flip side of the weakness of the flesh is engaging in a relationship intentionally given over to the flesh. The term “friends with benefits” is common parlance among today’s college students, but this type of relationship directly contradicts the purity and fidelity of proper Christian sexuality. Christopher Ash, in another CCI booklet entitled “Christianity & Sexuality,” has written an excellent essay on sexuality in Christian relationships.

In the case of romantic relationships, the major indicator that things are going in the wrong direction takes place when, rather than seeking the well being of the other, one seeks primarily the objects of his/her own desire—status, security, acceptance, intimacy, and sex. The goal of any dating relationship should be to develop into a good friendship, but of course along the way it takes a different form. When such a relationship culminates in marriage, you ought to enjoy your marriage, but also use it to form friendship with your spouse and with God. Dating relationships based on pleasure or utility, without a public commitment to one another before God, will malfunction and fall short of the mark.

Relationships with the opposite sex often become complicated very quickly. This should not prevent us from entering into meaningful relationships, but nor should we take them too lightly (1 Cor. 10:12). More than ever, those who are considering entering into a dating relationship need to recognize boundaries that are not artificially constructed but rooted in a deep understanding of the way a dating relationship can lead to Christian friendship and possibly marriage. For example, before entering into such a dating relationship, two people must know each other well enough to perceive the faith and character of the other and to be clear on the expectations for a dating relationship. These expectations should be in consonance with both persons’ demonstrated character and should not therefore come as a surprise. Topics to be discussed include physical boundaries of intimacy; faith commitments and practices; acceptable places and amount of time to be together; how and when to meet each others’ family and friends; and so on.

### *Relational Red Flags*

The various kinds of friendship described above can also go out of bounds, so to speak. There are pitfalls in relational life that can lead a Christian friendship into idolatry, the betrayal of God and his purposes in our disordered love. These red flags suggest things are not on the right track. This is not a dismissal of all people in your life who struggle or

fail to be perfect. None of us is or will be without the mercy and grace of Christ. However, the following red flags should give you reason to practice caution in your relationships.

The first kind of warning sign pertains to the primary goal, aim, or purpose of a relationship being or becoming pleasure. When you are in a relationship with someone solely because of the pleasure you get from the relationship, something is wrong. A familiar example of this comes when we engage in a romantic relationship primarily because it boosts our self-esteem or gives us physical pleasure. There are many similar relationships in which we fail to move beyond what makes us feel good in the moment. Too often, relationships based on shared interests become reducible to the interest itself and the joy of sharing it with someone else.

The second kind of problematic relationship is one that fails to surpass fulfilling a practical need of some kind. For example, consider the stereotypical *quid pro quo* between the popular athlete and the intelligent student. The athlete helps make the “nerd” become more popular and capable of participating in athletics while the smart kid helps the “jock” overcome his ineptitude in his studies. When the utility that a relationship has to offer exceeds or competes with your care for the well-being and salvation of the other, the relationship has gone off the tracks.

In addition to these general guidelines, there are a host of corresponding actions that signal that a relationship is in jeopardy of contributing to sinful habits rather than helping to build up each person in Christ. For example, when you are invited by your supposed friend to collude in evil or immoral activity, this is a sign that the relationship is likely no longer a true friendship, ordered to the good. Some instances of this, such as an invitation to participate in explicitly sinful activities, are obvious, while others are not. Augustine gives an example of the former from his adolescence in which he and a group of friends work together to steal pears from someone’s pear tree and then throw them to a group of pigs.<sup>32</sup> Augustine describes he and his supposed “friends” as a “gang of naughty adolescents.”<sup>33</sup> A more subtle kind of invitation often comes in the form of a conversation gone wrong, usually in the direction of gossip or slander. In the context of a relationship, the symptoms of failure or disordered love are usually subsequent to a gradual decline and perversion of true friendship, if this were ever in place at all. For Christians, these relationships need to be redeemed and ordered to the good so that they can truly be called good Christian friendship.

### *Conclusion*

We have offered here a three-part vision of friendship based on ancient wisdom, divine revelation, and practical application. Throughout this essay, we have assumed two trustworthy guides for progressing through our Christian pilgrimage. The first is the Word of God. As Christians united with Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we must take up and read God’s Word as our true daily bread. By becoming people of the Word who know its teaching and continue growing in our understanding of God and his ways, we will become more equipped to understand and discern what God has for us and to what he calls us as we grow in wisdom.

The second is our conscience, which for Christians is aided by God’s grace. As Paul teaches in Romans 2:15, every person has a conscience by which we have the ability to use discernment in making decisions. As consuming alcohol without getting drunk requires each Christian to practice his or her own conscience—some people abstain and others consume in

moderation—so too with relationships. Scripture is the rule by which we measure our consciences. Yet while Scripture provides helpful parameters about loving God and loving others, it is not written to provide specific prescriptions for every aspect of human relationships. Scripture leaves room for interpretation on certain ethical issues. We are responsible for using our God-given and God-aided conscience to make judicious decisions consonant with the revealed will of God.

If this booklet teaches us anything new, it will be that having good Christian friends will also greatly help us in making such decisions. In other words, we have presented the case for friendship as a third trustworthy guide for the Christian pilgrim, although as with our conscience, God’s Word, the norming norm for the Christian life, must test and correct our friends. Christian friendship plays a central role in the sanctification of the individual believer. A good friend helps us “guard our hearts” (Prov. 4:23) and grow in our love for God (cf., 1 Thess. 3:12-13) so that we achieve communion with God.

Only by meditating on Scripture, adhering to our conscience, and cultivating good Christian friendships will we find ourselves equipped to honor God in all our relationships. And this is a worthy task, for friendship remains one of God’s most precious gifts to the Christian—by loving well as friends we learn to live well in this world in preparation for life with God in the world to come.

#### FOR FURTHER READING

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Jonathan Barnes. *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*. Vol. 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

This text covers friendship in the context of virtue and the pursuit of the good life. In so doing, Aristotle offers a classical account of what it means to be a good friend and to aspire to the highest good in our relationships.

Augustine. *City of God*. Translated by Henry Bettenson. Penguin Classics. London: Penguin Books, 1984.

This influential apologetic case for seeking citizenship in the eternal City of God rather than settling for the earthly city provides classic Christian reflections on the nature of love, friendship, and happiness.

Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

In this intense personal testimony, Augustine shares the travails and the rewards of friendship on his pilgrimage from a young upstart rhetorician to a bishop and pioneer of the early Christian church.

Fernando, Ajith. *Reclaiming Friendship: Relating to Each Other in a Frenzied World*. Scottsdale, PN: Herald Press, 1993.

*Reclaiming Friendship* offers practical guidance on friendship by applying basic biblical wisdom from the book of Proverbs to the practice of Christian friendship in a contemporary world filled with complex challenges to Christian faith and life.

Hill, Wesley. *Spiritual Friendship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015.

This book stresses the importance of Godward and God-honoring friendship in light of God's revealed Word and in so doing offers classical and Christian wisdom on the topic. Wesley Hill has also built a community forum on God, Sexuality, and Relationships: <https://spiritualfriendship.org>.

Lewis, C. S. *The Four Loves*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1960.

C. S. Lewis masterfully weaves together insights on love from a perspective informed by philosophy, theology, and literature, and thereby provides useful discussions of the four different types of love animating human experience.

Wadell, Paul J. *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002.

*Becoming Friends* argues that, through rituals and practices of Christian worship, we come to understand the nature of the Christian life and acquire the virtues and dispositions that make the Christian life what it is.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1996), 69. Dunbar's original article was published six years earlier as "Neocortex Size as a Constraint on Group Size in Primates," *Journal of Human Evolution*, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*, 77: Dunbar argues that "human societies contain buried within them a natural grouping of around 150 people." The largest effective group size that Dunbar cites are American soldier units in WWII of about 223 (Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*, 75).

<sup>3</sup> College life, whether or not it fits the template of Olivia's experience, is the most common rite of passage for adolescents making the transition to adulthood in Western culture today (French scholar Arnold van Gennap wrote the book on rites of passage: Arnold van Gennap, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monicka B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee [The University of Chicago Press, 1960]).

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8:1 (trans., Jonathan Barnes, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 2, Bollingen Series LXXI [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984], 1825).

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8:12 (trans., Barnes, 1835).

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8:12 (trans., Barnes, 1835).

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8:12 (trans., Barnes, 1835).

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8:1-6 (trans., Barnes, 1825-31).

<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that some parts of the Bible appear to be interacting with Greco-Roman philosophy in such a way as to impact how the New Testament speaks about God, virtue, and friendship.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 7.9.14 (trans., Henry Chadwick [Oxford World's Classics; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], 121).

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *City of God* 18.41 (trans., Henry Bettenson [Penguin Classics; London: Penguin Books, 2003], 819).

<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *City of God* 18.41 (trans., Bettenson: 819).

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Levering, *The Theology of Augustine: An Introductory Guide to His Most Important Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 95.

<sup>14</sup> As Levering describes it, "Augustine offers a pattern of biblical reading, of living the Scriptures, that invites us to enjoy friendship with the Triune God who has created and redeemed us" (*The Theology of Augustine*, xiii).

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *City of God* 10.3 (trans., Bettenson: 376).

<sup>16</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.3-4 (trans., D. W. Robertson Jr., *On Christian Doctrine* [New York: Macmillan, 1958], 9): "Some things are to be enjoyed, others to be used, and there are others which are to be enjoyed and used. Those things which are to be enjoyed make us blessed. Those things which are to be

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used help and, as it were, sustain us as we move toward blessedness in order that we may gain and cling to those things which make us blessed....To enjoy something is to cling to it with love for its own sake. To use something, however, is to employ it in obtaining that which you love, provided that it is worthy of love.”

<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.5 (Robertson Jr.: 10).

<sup>18</sup> As Levering describes Augustine’s thinking, “in loving our neighbors and ourselves, we should do nothing that is not also fully and truly love of God. If we were to act against the love of God, we would thereby fail also to be true lovers of our neighbors and ourselves” (Levering, *The Theology of Augustine*, 6).

<sup>19</sup> Levering, *The Theology of Augustine*, 6: “With regard to our neighbors and ourselves, ‘use’ therefore signifies rightly ordered love rather than manipulation or instrumentalization.”

<sup>20</sup> John Woodhouse, *I Samuel: Looking for a Leader*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishing, 2008), 455.

<sup>21</sup> Murphy, *I Samuel*, 203-204.

<sup>22</sup> Murphy, *I Samuel*, 200.

<sup>23</sup> Eckhard Schnabel observes that “disagreements are the natural result of different opinions regarding the most effective missionary strategies” (Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012], 671).

<sup>24</sup> “While disagreements may be painful and the resulting separation less than ideal, God’s sovereign plan can still be at work, provided that the reasons for the separations are not personal prestige and power but considerations connected with the proclamation of the gospel” (Schnabel, *Acts*, 671).

<sup>25</sup> James McKeown, *Ruth*, Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 98.

<sup>26</sup> As McKeown puts it, “It was difficult to shake herself out of this sense of misery...It did not occur to her that the Moabite woman whose company she had not wanted would be the source of relief and future hope that she so much longed for” (McKeown, *Ruth*, 104).

<sup>27</sup> Yet, as James Edwards suggests, “Preparations and hospitality are indeed important, but they are not as important as ‘hearing Jesus’ word.’ The gospel of Jesus reprioritizes all of life” (James R. Edwards, *Luke*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015], 328).

<sup>28</sup> Edwards offers a helpful explanation: “Mary has made the gospel primary, to which all other things, even hospitality, are relative. The primacy of the gospel is the ‘good part,’ for it alone determines the life of discipleship, and it shall not be taken from Mary” (Edwards, *Luke*, 328).

<sup>29</sup> Relationships with the unbelieving are also important for helping Christians not to become isolated and to remain cognizant of the need of others to find friendship with God. Jesus calls his people to share the Good News (Matt. 28:19-20). We are not to be ashamed of the Gospel (Rom. 1:6)

<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *The Good of Marriage* 1 (trans., P. G. Walsh, Augustine, *De bono coniugali; De sancta uirginitate*, Oxford Early Christian Texts [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], 3).

<sup>31</sup> For a book that speaks to God’s intentions for relationship of men and women, see *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, ed., James R. Beck, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 2.3.8-2.10.18 (Chadwick: 28-34).

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 2.4.9 (Chadwick: 29).