

HOW TO BE A TRUE FRIEND 1 SAMUEL 18:1-4, 19:1-7, 20:41-42, 23:15-18

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a poetic genius whose contributions to English literature are considerable. He had a hard life. Before he was thirty, he began a devastating battle with arthritis. He took opium to deal with the pain and became an addict. Into the loneliness of his life came another poet, William Wordsworth, who became the greatest friend in Coleridge's life. But it was a relationship that had its ups and downs. Coleridge fell in love with Wordsworth's sister-in-law which led to the break up of Coleridge's already shaky marriage. His opium addiction alienated even Wordsworth for awhile. But eventually Coleridge was able to control his drug habit and he and Wordsworth renewed their rich friendship. He must have valued the shelter and comfort of that relationship a great deal because he provided us with one of the most interesting descriptions of friendship ever written: "Friendship is a sheltering tree."

We all need friends. To use Coleridge's image, we all need people in our lives that are like great, green trees in the middle of July spreading their big leafy limbs over us and helping to shelter us from the blazing, withering sun of trouble and heartache. We're in the midst of a study of David – one of the most important characters in the Bible. David was a man after and against God's heart. When you study his life, you learn some great lessons about how to have a relationship with God. Now, one interesting and sometimes overlooked aspect of David's life was his extraordinary friendship with a man named Jonathan, the son of Saul, the king of Israel. Jonathan was David's sheltering tree at a particularly difficult time in his life. Friendship is an important aspect of just being a human being. But friendship is also an important part of being a follower of Jesus. Friendship can be used by God to do so much that is good and necessary in our lives.

Are you a Jonathan to another person in your life? Are you "a sheltering tree"? Do you have a Jonathan in your life – someone who is a sheltering tree for you when the heat of life becomes too great? When you consider David and Jonathan's relationship, you see clearly...

THE IMPORTANCE OF A CLOSE FRIENDSHIP.

David and Jonathan's friendship was as wonderful as it was unlikely. The closest we get to understanding its depth is after both King Saul and Jonathan are killed in battle and David wrote a poem in their honor. In that poem, he says, "How I weep for you, my brother Jonathan! Oh, how much I loved you! And your love for me was deep, deeper than the love of women!" (2 Sam 1:26 NLT) Now, you should be aware that some people believe David and Jonathan were homosexual lovers because of that verse despite the fact that there isn't one shred of evidence from the Bible to support that view. Such a conclusion really tells us more about our own culture than it does David and Jonathan's friendship.

We live in a culture that's concluded that every deep, intimate human friendship must inevitably become romantic and sexual. We live in a culture that elevates romantic relationships as the "be all and end all" of human existence. Now, romantic relationships – and especially those that lead to marriage – should be celebrated for what they are. But, I don't think God ever intended marriage to satisfy completely your need for friendship. In fact, romance and even marriage may not result in the greatest possible human friendship. After all, David had several wives. But there was a bond with Jonathan – a soul to soul kinship, a brotherly attachment – that exceeded anything he found in marriage. That should be an encouragement to every single person here today. Marriage may or may not be God's will for your life. But you do not need to forfeit the joy of rich, meaningful, deep friendships with other people just because you don't have a spouse. Not all intimacy requires sex. Yes, friendship in marriage is a great blessing, but a great friendship may have nothing to do with marriage.

Why did David and Jonathan become such good friends? They shared much in common. They both seemed to fit the description of being "a man's man." If David was an expert with a sling, Jonathan was his equal with a bow and arrow. Both were fearless and courageous in battle to the point of being reckless. Both loved God deeply and seemed to have what you might call a sensitive soul. Both were men of godly character and moral principle. The Lord's name was never far from their lips. It occurs to me that if Jonathan had been Israel's first king instead of his father, Saul, we might never have heard of David. There would have been no need to replace Jonathan. He was that fine of a person.

Just think, though, how unlikely this friendship happened to be! Jonathan was King Saul's oldest son and thus the assumed heir to the throne of Israel. You might remember how insanely jealous Saul became of David when it became apparent that God had rejected Saul and chosen David to succeed him as king. There was to be no dynasty of Saul. Jonathan, the crown prince, would never inherit the throne. It would be completely understandable if Jonathan had resented David even more than his father hated David. There's the irony of it! When it became apparent that David was God's choice as the next king, we find no hint of jealousy in Jonathan whatsoever. The bond of their friendship was so strong and deep that Jonathan could even give up the throne to David with joy. Now, that's a friendship!

Do you have any deep, strong friendships? Are you a sheltering tree for someone? Is someone a sheltering tree for you? The point is often made that women seem to understand the benefit of close friendships more than we men do. And, in general, I think that's right. Women just seem to make close friends with other women more easily than men do. Guys probably are just less relational, but friendship is not any less important for guys than it is for gals. Men need to pray with other men, weep with other men, confide in other men, pour out their discouragement to other men and be affirmed and encouraged by other

men. The same is just as true for women, of course, but you gals don't usually have to be encouraged quite as much to do so.

This whole subject of friendship has been coming up in recent meetings of our Long Range Planning Ministry Team. It's becoming evident that God is opening doors of ministry to and with children in our community. We have more kids needing tutoring than we have tutors. We've seen a big increase in children coming out to our Wednesday clubs program in the last couple of years. We've had a great response to our reading buddies' ministry over at Valley Forge Elementary. We're gearing up for another great Jesse Coles Day Camp experience next month which will be followed up by a nine week Monday – Friday summer food program. But we're also realizing that as a church we have to offer more than a program, a lesson or a meal as valuable as those might be.

We need to offer these children friendship. We need to offer them godly relationships. We need to be a sheltering tree. Through authentic, genuine relationships we hope that God will open doors of friendship with parents and families in our community so that lives will be transformed by Jesus. Stay tuned. You're going to hear more about this in the months ahead! We don't need teachers with degrees. We don't need leaders. We don't need people to develop and run programs. We need men and women who are willing to be friends – primarily friends to kids many who come from some pretty difficult life situations. Eat a meal with them. Show an interest in them. Ask them about their lives and situations. Pray for them. Jim Davis, a good friend of mine, likes to say, "Rick, God always works through relationships." He's right! God is a relational Being in Himself. We believe in the Trinity – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Is it OK to describe the relationship between the members of the Trinity as, in some sense, a "friendship"? I think so. God is the author of all true friendship. We see friendship reach a very high level with David and Jonathan. And I believe God is calling our church to a ministry of friendship with and to our community's children. David and Jonathan's friendship underlines the importance of a close friendship. But it also reveals some of ...

THE MARKS OF A GODLY FRIENDSHIP.

Close friends impact your life. Close friends are hugely influential. Close friends rub off on you – their morals, their perspectives, their convictions, their behavior, and even their walk with God or lack thereof. The Bible says, "As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend." (Pro 27:17 NLT) As a follower of Jesus you should, by all means, have friendships with non-Christians. How else are people who need Jesus going to find Jesus unless those who already know Him are friends with them? Be that as it may, you need some godly people to be close friends, too. It's very special when two people who both have the Holy Spirit working in them and living through them develop a friendship.

In David and Jonathan's friendship you can see several marks of a godly friendship. There is, first of all, a willingness to make sacrifices for your friend. Let's read 1 Samuel 18:1-4. Bible scholars explain that to receive an article of clothing from a king or a king's son was deemed the highest possible honor that could be conferred on a citizen. David, the son of an ordinary man, gave his love and respect to Jonathan in return. A godly friendship is always marked by a willingness to make sacrifices one for another. Being a sheltering tree involves a willingness to sacrifice.

Secondly, a godly friendship means loyally defending your friend from any and all attacks. Saul eventually turned against David and tried to kill him. Jonathan loyally defended David even against his own father, Saul. Let's look at 1 Samuel 19:1-7. Whether your friend is facing physical, emotional or spiritual attack, you provide whatever kind of defense you can offer. Even the fact that Saul was his father couldn't dissuade Jonathan from loyally defending his friend, David. Being a sheltering tree means loyally defending your friend.

Thirdly, a godly friendship is revealed by great faithfulness to one another. David and Jonathan lived out literally a principle we find in Prov. 17:17 (NLT), "A friend is always loyal, and a brother is born to help in time of need." Jonathan risked his own life to help David escape Saul's continued attempts to kill David. David returned that faithfulness to Jonathan long after his friend's death. After David got established as the king of Israel, he sought out and found the last living son of Jonathan – a man by the name of Mephibosheth. Now Mephibosheth was unable to walk on his own. Because of his great love for Jonathan, David essentially made Mephibosheth a member of his own family and he lived in the palace for the rest of his life. Being a sheltering tree will provide many opportunities to show great faithfulness to your friend.

Fourthly, a godly friendship offers the gift of encouragement regularly. Even though Jonathan loved and supported David all during the time that his father, King Saul, was trying to kill David, as a man of principle Jonathan believed his place was with his doomed father, Saul. Nevertheless, he sought David out secretly on at least two occasions for the expressed purpose of encouraging him. Let's check out 1 Samuel 20:41-42. Look with me also at 1 Samuel 23:15-18. I love that phrase where it says, "...Jonathan went to David... and helped him find strength in God." (1 Sam 23:16 NIV) That's what a godly friend will do for you! He or she will help you to find strength in God. Encouragement! Not a sermon. Not a rebuke. Not a shallow pep talk. Just soul-stirring, spirit-boosting godly encouragement!

It's professional basketball playoff time. K.C. Jones was the coach of the Boston Celtics for several years and he was renowned for offering his players unforgettable words of encouragement. But only when they needed it most. One of his players, forward Kevin McHale, said that Jones would never congratulate a player after he had made a great play. One night, McHale asked Coach Jones

why he never complimented players when they were turning in outstanding performances. “Kevin,” he said, “after you’ve made the winning basket, you’ve got 15,000 people cheering for you, TV commentators are rushing over to interview you, and everybody is giving you high fives. You don’t need me then. When you need a friend most is when nobody is cheering.” Being a sheltering tree means giving the gift of encouragement regularly.

Every human friendship has limitations. That was true of David and Jonathan’s friendship. After his father, Saul, started to try to murder David, Jonathan’s ability to interact personally with his friend suffered. Jonathan didn’t join David in exile. Then, Jonathan was killed in battle and David went on to become the king. Every human friendship is limited. Every human friendship, no matter how wonderful, ends in this life. That’s why I wanted to say something about ...

THE FACT OF AN ETERNAL FRIENDSHIP.

The Bible calls Jesus many things – King, Lord, Savior. It also reminds us that we can call Him “Friend.” Jesus is the eternal Friend. In fact, Jesus fulfills in the ultimate sense the promise we find in Proverbs 18:24 (NLT), “There are ‘friends’ who destroy each other, but a real friend sticks closer than a brother.” What does it mean to become and to be Jesus’ friend? How does that happen? It happens, first of all, when you take the step of faith or trust in Him for this life and eternity. The Bible says, “... ‘Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith.’ He was even called the friend of God.” (Jam 2:23 NLT) When you put your life in the hands of Jesus, you become His friend. When you surrender your will to His will, you become His friend. When you trust Him to get you into Heaven instead of in your own goodness, you become His friend. You don’t start out your life as Jesus’ friend. No one does. You become His friend through faith in Him. You maintain that friendship with Jesus by growing in trust and dependence upon Him every day.

Here’s a second requirement for friendship with Jesus. Quite simply, it’s obedience. Jesus Himself said, “You are my friends if you do what I command.” (John 15:14 NLT) Friendship with Jesus is unlike any other friendship. Imagine one of your close friends telling you that if you want to maintain your friendship, you’re going to have to do whatever he or she wants you to do! You’d probably terminate any friendship like that and who would blame you? Jesus is indeed your friend, but He’s no ordinary Friend. This friendship is not about having an equal relationship. Real friendship with Jesus entails giving Him increasing control of your values, your attitudes, your behavior and your lifestyle. When you choose each day to live for Jesus and according to His will, you are His friend.

Why would Jesus make submission to Him a condition of friendship with Him? Because Jesus has your best interests in mind and because He knows what is best for you better than you do, His invitation is motivated by love. He’s already proven His love for you in the most remarkable way. He said, “There is no

greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13 NLT)
Jesus is the One who sacrificed Himself on the cross and suffered His Father's judgment upon your sin by taking its punishment upon Himself. He literally laid down His life for you. Your sins are forgiven because His blood was shed for you. We're going to celebrate the greatness and wonder of Jesus' friendship in just a few moments as we partake of the Lord's Supper together. In addition, there is no truer Friend in every one of life's difficult times than your Friend, Jesus. He is the greatest, single sheltering tree that you will ever find this side of Heaven. And to cultivate and enjoy that eternal friendship – that friendship above all other friendships – is the greatest mission of your life and mine.

Have you ever seen El Capitan – that sheer rock wall that soars 3,569 feet above the floor of Yosemite Valley in California? It's a special place for rock climbers. Even the world's elite climbers find scaling El Capitan a stomach wrenching combination of difficulty and danger. It's not your average climbing experience. But then, Mark Wellman and his friend, Mike Corbett, aren't your average guys. On July 19, 1989, these two friends assembled 200 pounds of climbing gear and launched their assault on El Capitan. During the next seven days they endured temperatures as high as 105 degrees and gusts of wind that sent them swinging 10 feet away from the rock wall. But finally, they stood in triumph atop El Capitan. At least Mike Corbett did. Mark Wellman couldn't stand. He's a paraplegic. Mark Wellman became the first person to scale El Capitan without the use of his legs. How did he do it?

Mark had given up rock climbing after a fall had left him paralyzed from the waist down. But a friend encouraged him to climb again by helping Mark develop a technique using an 8 inch pull bar called a jumar which was attached to the climbing rope. Mark literally pulled himself up the mountain. He later estimated that the climb up El Capitan was the equivalent of 7,000 pull ups. But Mark Wellman couldn't have done it without Mike Corbett. Mike led the way, pounding pitons into cracks and attaching the rope to the pitons. Rock climbers call this "laying protection." If you slip, you only fall the length of rope from the nearest piton not the whole way down. On the seventh day of their climb, Mike was unable to secure the pitons in the loose rock around the summit. So, fully aware that one misstep would send them plunging to the valley floor, Mike hoisted Mark onto his back and climbed the last 100 yards to the top.

May God grant each of us close and godly friendships like Mark Wellman and Mike Corbett, like David and Jonathan! But none of us are going to make it the top of this mountain called Life without the Lord Jesus Christ, the Great Friend. You simply can't do it without Jesus. He goes before you and prepares the way. He compensates for your handicaps. He lays protection for you to keep you out of danger. If you slip, His grace will catch you. And if climbing the mountain of Life just gets too hard, He will put you on His back and lift you to the next level. Is Jesus your Friend? Is He your sheltering tree? Maybe the better question is, are you Jesus' Friend?