

Relationships – finding friends

The creation account in Genesis makes it clear that God exists in relationship (the trinity) and that he created us to exist in relationship ("it is not good for man to be alone").

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

New Living Translation (NLT)

9 Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. 10 If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble. 11 Likewise, two people lying close together can keep each other warm. But how can one be warm alone? 12 A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.

Most successful enterprises have two or more people at the core. Richard Branson of the Virgin Group always worked closely with an accountant partner who never got the limelight but who kept the business on track.

Verse 11- reminds me of the recent stories of road traffic accident victims being left alone beside the roadside – on their own.

There was no central heating in those days so people shared beds for warmth (not just for sex).

Heroic battles fought back to back, but also in work/life – you need people watching out for you.

There is an allusion to the trinity, the strength of three. Often used in wedding sermons – triple-braided cord (Husband, wife, God).

This is a huge subject so we are only touching on one small topic here – finding friends. There are many different types of friends:

Facebook friends

Illustrated by a letter to the Oldie, from Peter White, Holbrook, Derbyshire, "Dear Sir, I haven't got a computer, but I was told about Facebook and Twitter, and am trying to make friends outside Facebook and Twitter whilst applying the same principles. Every day I walk down the street and tell passers-by what I have eaten, how I feel, what I have done the night before and what I will do for the rest of the day. I give them pictures of my wife, my daughter, my dog and me gardening and on holiday, spending time by the pool. I also listen to their conversations, tell them I "like" them and give them my opinion on every subject that interests me ... whether it interests them or not. And it works, I already have four people following me: two police officers, a social worker and a psychiatrist."

Famous friends

Illustrated by Markus Persson, the creator of Minecraft who sold it for £1.5bn in 2014. Tweeted, "hanging out in Ibiza with famous friends and partying with famous people, and I've never felt more isolated". Old friends are too busy to play with him. His girlfriend has left him for someone more normal.

Long-time/little-while friends

Pen-friends

Soul-mates-friends

Husband, wife

Some find making friends really easy

Some find making friends really hard

Some are not even sure what constitutes a friend

Why are relationships are difficult?

Because, fundamentally, our relationship with God has broken down.

Christians should be the best at repairing and building relationships because our fundamental relationship, with our creator, has been redeemed, is being put back together, through Jesus.

There are seasons & opportunities for making friends

- School, school gate, ante-natal classes
- Work, Hobbies, Clubs
- Church – BGOP/SGOP/Serving
- Student life

Shira Gabriel, associate professor of psychology, Buffalo, NY (DT 28 August 2010).

Research published in *Self and Identity* (Journal).

[4 studies involving 376 people. Most of us spend much of our time and effort focused on individual achievements such as work, hobbies and schooling. However, research indicated that the events that end up being the most important in our lives], the events that bring us the most happiness and also carry the potential for the most pain, are social events - moments of connecting to others and feeling their connection to us.

I want to make a distinction between our relationships with everyone who comes into our life – we are called to love and serve everyone – and our close friends – those we seek out deliberately and with whom you hope to build deeper relationships over a longer period of time.

LIKE A GARDEN

It's like planning a garden – what do you choose to plant? Which plants, bushes trees? You tend these plants, look after them over a long period perhaps.

It is wise to do this carefully so that you have a garden with healthy plants which you like. Some growing into trees with deep roots providing shelter and fruit.

If you like business-speak you could think of it in the way that Bill Hybels describes it – putting together your own personal development team.

A group of people who will influence you for the good over your life. Who in the difficult times will help and support and who in the good times will help you make good choices. And vice versa.

But don't be fooled – when you invite people into any relationship with you they will influence you – for good or for ill.

1 Corinthians 15:33, 'Bad company corrupts good character.'

So what you are looking for is **character**. The bible teaches us that we should find friends by their good character – not giftings, skills, good looks, personality or popularity.

Proverbs 6:16-19 sets a context for finding friends.

16 There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him:

17 haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood,

18 a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil,

19 a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.

When we see these character traits, we don't abandon the person or ignore them – we should still seek to love them, serve them and bear witness to Jesus in our lives and words.

But we don't give them the space or opportunity to influence us and our lives.

Haughty eyes

Pride – people who are proud, superior, always competing to show themselves off as better. People who try and impose themselves over you because they are richer – or poorer, brighter – or more stupid, better-looking, more talented, know more people, more spiritual. People who easily take offence.

The bible says that pride goes before a fall. Let's be there to help them when they fall but not to take us down with them.

Humility - we're looking for people who may or may not be any of those things but are

humble with it. Whose confidence in themselves and friendship is not based on being better than us. People who big us up, encourage us. Make us feel better about ourselves.

Lying tongue

Untruthful – people who play fast and loose with the truth. If we get close to someone who lies easily then sooner or later we'll be betrayed by those lies. Lying starts off with little white lies which gradually build to big ones. People who slide down this slope eventually almost default to lying. Exaggerating, putting the best spin on things, weaving a yarn. If we are influenced by that it becomes harder to separate out truth from lies.

Truth-teller - the person of integrity who always tells the truth even when it is hard. One of my favourite DJs from my youth who died a couple of years ago, John Peel, famously said that he always told the truth because it meant he didn't have to remember what he had told people. Look for someone you can rely on to keep their word, speak with integrity – even when it is not popular.

Shed innocent blood

The abuse of power – this is about the powerful and the weak. The destruction of the innocent. People who don't seem to notice or be moved by other's weakness or suffering or hardship. They take advantage when they can. Eventually they'll take advantage of you or suck you into a similar attitude.

Meek – Jesus said that the meek are blessed – for they shall inherit the earth. By meek He means those who are under powerful self-control, like a stallion which can be led by a gentle touch – powerful but choosing to express its power carefully. These are the people Jesus entrusts with real power. Have meek people amongst your friends.

Wicked Schemes – feet that run quickly to do evil

Unethical behaviour – These are people who devise systems and ways of working which are unethical but work to their advantage. Typically they know the rules and bend them, stretch the boundaries. Their moral compass drifts.

How do you think VW ended up going from being the world's largest vehicle manufacturer one week to losing a third of its value two weeks later? Somewhere in the company there is a culture of setting up wicked schemes to try and bend the rules. It may not be clear where it started but people have been infected by it.

Or consider FIFA and Sepp Blatter, in the news again this week. Or the ongoing banking scandals.

You hear about people making out that there is good pornography as well as bad pornography. Blurring the lines, greying the distinction, "It's only a bit of fun, a laugh for an evening". No it isn't. It's always a bad thing.

Ethical – Find people who behave ethically. Go against the grain. Scrupulous on accurate expense claims and tax returns. Don't hope for someone to turn a blind eye. The hallmarks of an ethical person are: transparency, openness and awkwardness amongst the clever ones who skirt the grey areas, close to the cliff edge.

False witness

Gossip – this is different from "lying tongue" – this is someone who slanders another person. The person who can't keep confidences. Needing to do another down so as to feel better about myself.

Listen to the conversation. What are they talking about? If it is about another person do you end up thinking good of that person or ill? What will they be saying about you when your back is turned?

A key characteristic of finding a friend is being able to talk with them. If their insecurities mean that you can't trust them to keep confidences, if they might speak poorly of you, you are not going to be able to talk with them are you?

Trustworthy – Someone who talks less rather than more. Someone who finds good things to say about people or who keeps quiet. When you unburden your heart to this friend you know that it's safe to speak.

Stirring up conflict in the community

Dissension – There are some people who just spread strife wherever they go. The bible is very clear on how bad this is. Frequently, there are lists of bad things, dissension pops up on the list. Why?

Because we have been saved from our sins by a loving God who saw fit to step past all our wrongdoings and reconcile us to himself on the cross. We are called to reconciliation not discord.

2 Corinthians 5:18, All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

People who nurse grudges, who want their pound of flesh, demand huge apologies, take offence, are chronically unforgiving – they would be draining and dangerous people to have as friends.

Peace-makers – Jesus said, “Blessed are the peace-makers”. Spreading strife is not okay, it’s not idiosyncratic, it’s sinful and we should find our influential friends amongst those who are peace-makers.

People who recognise the incredible grace of God in reconciling us to himself and who do everything to reconcile us to each other – even when it means loss to them, loss of esteem or advantage or reputation.

FINDING FRIENDS – look for Humility, Truth-telling, Meekness, Ethical, Trustworthiness, Peace-making

This looks very much like Jesus doesn’t it?

In comparison, we are all broken and we are all surrounded by broken people. We worship a God who sacrificed himself so that we could be restored and healed and mended – becoming more like Jesus.

We should always be friendly. Extending grace to others and serving them.

Freely you have received, said Jesus, so freely give. (Matthew 10:8).

But when it comes to finding friends to gather around you, some of whom may be with you for life; friends to influence you and help you grow toward the person Jesus calls you to be, it is crucial that you put the right plants in your garden and tend them.

Character influences and changes you so when you are finding friends, before you look for: gifts, skills, looks, temperament, the ability to tell jokes, wealth; look for good character: Humility, Telling the truth, Meekness, Ethical behaviours, Trustworthiness and Peace-making.

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