

The Golden Coin of Friendship

It was a joy to see an old friend of forty years while ministering at First Baptist Church of Long Beach, California. Jerry Vargo's dorm was right next to my dorm while in college in Indiana. We always seemed to have a lot in common, such as love of Christ, co-laborers in ministry and amateur history and literature buffs. One of our favorite activities was when we had finished our assignments and lights were out we would sit in his room and the only thing visible was the small red illumined light on his stereo as we listened to recorded readings of Edgar Allen Poe. We also had girlfriends that had much in common. He was in love with Gayle Graves, daughter of Mel Graves, Vice-Chairman of the Board of Deacons at First Baptist of Hammond, whom our pastor said was one of the finest Christians he knew. I was in love with Barbara Wright, daughter of another deacon, Paul Wright, whom our pastor personally told me was the "salt of the earth." Barbara and Gayle (along with our own Cindy Lord Briner) were part of a musical group, "The Hylander Trio" back in our college days. Through the years friends have come and gone, but Jerry has remained a faithful and true friend for now over forty years.

It has been a few years since Jerry and I have seen each other face-to-face, although we have kept in touch. Every year his wife sends out their Christmas letter that I referred to as "The Epistle of Gayle." Jerry and I had a great couple of days at their church in California. He took me on a personally guided tour of the most famous ship in Anglo/American history, the Queen Mary purchased in 1967 by the city of Long Beach. It is hard to believe it is longer and twice the weight of the Titanic. It is the only ship of that era that survives and it was the grandest of all ocean-going vessels. It was constantly used during World War II to help the cause against Nazi Germany. During its cruising days, she carried approximately 2,000 passengers and 1,200 crewmembers. It rarely exceeded 4,000 en total on board. The exception was between 1939 and 1946 covering the duration of World War II. During that time she transported on each trans-Atlantic trip an average of 6,000 to 8,000 soldiers from the United States and Canada to aid the allies in defeating Hitler. The Queen Mary holds the record of transporting more people on one Atlantic crossing than any single vessel in the history of the world. On one trip this majestic ship carried 16,683 soldiers from America to Europe to join their comrades in arms! She was such a blessing to the allies and a bane to the Axis that Hitler offered a reward of 250,000 dollars to the u-boat or ship's captain that would sink her. Amazingly, this 180,000 ton behemoth was also the fastest sea going vessel on the seven seas and could outrun any German submarine. It was like old times as Jerry took me back in time aboard her Majesty, the Queen Mary! An even greater boon to the trip was when Jerry took me out to his house to visit Gayle. The most recent "Epistle of Gayle" gave the usual Christmas greetings and family information but said nothing that had just been discovered. Gayle had cancer, stage four. We could not believe it. I had been booked several years to come to their church and Gayle looked forward to coming out to the meeting, but now Gayle can only take six steps and she is as winded as

if she climbed a high mountain. She can no longer ascend the stairs to their bedroom and for the past three weeks has been confined to a large green chair in their living room. I asked Jerry if I could see Gayle and have a word of prayer. He told me she had requested that he (Jerry) not make this request of me because she knew I was busy with morning afternoon and evening services, but if I asked, she would be pleased to see me. When we got there, she looked the same, except for the breathing apparatus that aids her to maintain her oxygen supply. We shared the Word and prayed and as we left, I felt like the highlight of the day was not walking aboard her Royal Majesty's ship, but rather when I left the presence of the daughter of the King of Kings, a royal princess in her own right who can take the threat of life itself with a royal attitude.

Old friends are rare and Jerry illustrated as beautifully as anyone when he brought me into his office and said, "Brother Johnny, I've got something I want to give you." He actually had two things to give me. He gave me a book of sermons by the famed and holy servant of the Lord, Isaac Watts that is two hundred years old. Jerry also presented me with an 1881 five dollar gold piece, in near mint condition. Then he said, "In 1881 you could take this coin and buy the best suit in town with it, and you know what?" He continued, "You could still take this coin today and buy the best suit in town, because this solid piece of gold has never lost value. It still buys as much today as it did when it was made." Then Jerry got very serious and said, "Friendship is like this gold coin. Friendship is the gold standard, through the years it never loses its value, it is as trustworthy and valuable today as it was when first minted. And I wanted to give this to you to remind you of our friendship."

We turn our minds to this grand thought, the golden coin of friendship. How is a great friendship found and nurtured?

1. You must search for the friend.

Rarely will you ever find gold on or near the surface. It is found in mines and the lowest parts of water. Gold is nine times heavier than water and three times heavier than iron. This is why the old prospector goes down deep into the stream and pans for gold. Gold seeks the lowest part of its habitation.

Like prospecting for gold, dig deep for a true friend. Too often we settle for surface relationships. *"Do this now, my son, and deliver thyself, when thou art come into the hand of thy friend; go, humble thyself, and make sure thy friend"* (Proverbs 6:3).

2. A friend is refined in the crucible.

As Jerry and I casually discussed college days and friends we had mutually known, I was quite aware that this old friend was no "fair-weather friend." When you go through the fires you discover the gold is refined and comes forth the purer. The Bible says, *"The fining pot is for silver, and the furnace for gold: but the LORD trieth the hearts"* (Proverbs 17:3). God points out that He tries His people. Trials are the crucibles He allows to bring the pure gold out. Job said, *"But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold"* (Job 23:10).

A few years ago I was confronted by a delegation from a rather large group of people. I was told, "We love you, we want you to preach for us, but if you preach for us, you cannot preach for them (another Christian fellowship)." I

informed this representation I would not disown my friends for their fellowship. The crucible brings gold into God-ordained friendships. Solomon said, *“A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity”* (Proverbs 17:17).

3. A friend ornaments you well.

Refined gold is made to be worn and seen. A true friend is no one to be ashamed of! It has often been said that a man can be judged by who his friends are. Solomon said, *“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver. As an earring of gold, and an ornament of fine gold, so is a wise reprover upon an obedient ear”* (Proverbs 25: 11,12). The Bible tells us, *“Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend”* (Proverbs 27:17). *“Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful”* (Proverbs 27:6).

A friend exhorts you and believes in you when no one else will. I believe it was Emerson who said, *“A friend walks in when the world walks out.”* Although the friend is your faithful comrade, he or she is not afraid to *“tell it like it is.”* A friend with integrity will serve you well in this fickle, filthy world, where compromise of character is par for the course. This is why ultimately, you have no greater friend than Jesus. He will keep us straight! James said, *“And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God”* (James 2:23). Friends of God, those who have found a friend in Jesus, are righteous people. Make God your friend and make friends of those who are already good friends with God. *“He that walketh with wise men shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed”* (Proverbs 13:20).

-Pastor Pope-

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