

***Question: Is it possible for men to have genuine friendships with other men without assuming something sexual may be involved? What would Jesus say?***

The gospel stories show that Jesus had no problem with friendships among men. He surrounded himself with twelve male disciples, and the apostle John referred to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23). Unfortunately, today’s society makes it somewhat difficult for men to have meaningful friendships with other men for fear of being viewed as homosexual. But just as women have learned to cherish their female friendships, so men need to develop meaningful, non-sexual friendships with other men. Even a man in a healthy marriage to a supportive wife needs at least one good male friend. No woman can understand the soul of a man quite like another man.

I believe that Jesus would commend the biblical story of the friendship between Jonathan, the son of Saul the first king of Israel, and David, Saul’s successor. We are told that “Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself” (1 Samuel 18:1). Even when their friendship was tested by the jealousy of Jonathan’s father, they remained loyal to one another (1 Samuel 20:42). Since these men were married to women and God’s law commanded that a man must not lie with a man as with a woman (Leviticus 18:22), we have no reason to suspect that this was a homosexual relationship. Instead, their story illustrates some characteristics of a good male-to-male friendship.

One important characteristic of David and Jonathan’s friendship was their openness and honesty with each other. When David became convinced that Saul wanted to kill him, he questioned Jonathan: “What have I done? What is my crime? How have I wronged your father that he is trying to take my life?” Jonathan denied this charge, but he also agreed to a plan by which they could find out the truth. Jonathan said to David, “Whatever you want me to do, I’ll do for you” (1 Samuel 20:1-4). Sometimes male egos make it difficult for men to question one another without one of them becoming defensive or resentful. But David and Jonathan demonstrated how this can be a valuable characteristic of genuine, trusting friendships.

Loyalty and dependability are also vital to true and lasting friendships among men. Jonathan said to David: “But if my father is inclined to harm you, may the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if I do not let you know and send you away safely” (1 Sam. 20:13). Jonathan did not give his word lightly, especially knowing that the LORD was witness between them. They were true soul-brothers who pledged loyalty to each other above even a father-son relationship. They knew that when it came to their friendship with each other “a man’s word was his bond.”

When Jonathan made a covenant with David committing himself to protect David from harm, he also requested that David “reaffirm his oath out of love for him” (1 Samuel 20:17). True friendship is a two-way street. The failure of one to be faithful to the friendship makes it difficult for the other to be faithful. Thus, David was not bothered when asked to “reaffirm” his word.

Jonathan was also willing to risk his own life for the sake of his friend David. Saul’s anger flared up against Jonathan. He said: “You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don't I know that you have sided with the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of the mother who bore you?” (1 Samuel 20:30). When Jonathan defended David, Saul threw his spear at him to kill him. We are then told that “Jonathan got up from the table in fierce anger; on that second day of the month he did not eat, because he was grieved at his father's shameful treatment of David” (1 Samuel 20:34).

A healthy male-to-male friendship in no way degrades the beauty and value of male-female relationships. Neither does a healthy male-female relationship deny the place for male-male or female-female friendships. As one writer said, “Men are from Mars and women are from Venus.” Because men and women are different, there is value in friendships with those who are of the same sex; and those friendships do not need to be seen as unholy.

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