

FRIENDSHIP

(Acts 20) Today we look at Acts 20 and a story from the life and ministry of Paul. He is speaking here to the elders of the church at Ephesus, and we pick up at verse 32 where he offers some parting words to his friends and comrades Acts 20: **32-38** *And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.* ³³ *I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes.* ³⁴ *You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me.* ³⁵ *In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'* ³⁶ *When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.* ³⁷ *And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him,* ³⁸ *grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship.*

A man, by the unusual name of David Smith, has written a book entitled, "The Friendless American Male." Can you guess from that what the book is about? The thesis of the book is that American men rarely have significant relationships with other men. Most of us are friendless. Mr. Smith recalled speaking with one man who was moving and who sadly noted that after living six years in this one city - when he left there was really no one to say "goodbye." I read that, and thought it to be fairly common and yet I was struck by the contrast between that scenario and the one described in Acts 20. Man, this was a scene when Paul started to leave! These men are weeping, hugging, kissing because their friend is leaving. Parting is such a sorrow, but it's a sweet sorrow if it testifies to a closeness and warmth between people. Paul set sail that day with a heart that was full. He knew he was loved and there were some folks back in Ephesus who genuinely cared for him.

Paul was not a friendless male. And I would suggest that the reality of the friendless Christian, whether male or female, is not one we should tolerate. But, I must agree with David Smith, at least concerning men, that is just how it often is. There are friendless American females too but not nearly as many. Women tend to be more verbal, expressive and personal. Men, however, more often than not, are closed off from others. They pursue their jobs and their hobbies pretty much in isolation. Outside of family, and often including family, relationships never penetrate the surface. To a man, other men are only good to help you achieve a task or to assemble teams. Apart from that

it's, *you go your way and I'll go mine*. We isolate ourselves with fences and walls. School days may have included close friends but once you are in to career and family, forget it! How destructive this is to health and happiness can hardly be estimated. And how different it is from a Scriptural lifestyle! The brotherly love of man for man is found all over the New Testament: in Acts 20, in the letters to Timothy, in Paul's description in Philippians of Epaphroditus as "my brother and fellow-worker and fellow-soldier." There is a dramatic discrepancy between Scriptural living and our cultural situation today. Let's look at that discrepancy, the Biblical norms and what can be done about it.

First I would have you consider the human need for intimacy. By "intimacy" I simply refer to close relationships wherein the veils are taken down and some measure of real interpersonal understanding is achieved. These relationships are rare - especially among men. Men are taught how they are "supposed" to be: strong, effective, undisturbable. The image of ideal manhood is portrayed by the one called *Bond, James Bond*. I have to tell you this - I once had occasion to place a phone call to an insurance agent. His name was given to me as *Jim Bond*, but most *Jims* are also what? *James*. The man answered the phone by saying, "*This is James Bond.*" How cool is that? And guess what his phone number was? 645-0007. This fellow was a nice Christian man, but the secret agent is the one we value, but can't live up to. Real men are not like the storied spy. We are not so cool, so strong, so on top of things and so imperturbable. But there is some pressure in society to put on that kind of mask.

When I was in seventh grade I attended a 7-9th grade Jr. High. On the way to my first period class one day I was walking alone when I was approached by a 9th grader, who walked toward me out of a circle of black students and was around six-feet tall. He blocked my path and said, "Hey boy, give me a dime." What would you do? What should I have done? I really don't know, but I took out a dime and flipped it to him. He let it fall to the ground at his feet. Then he said to me, "Pick it up." What would you do? What should I have done? I picked up the dime and handed it to him. He walked back to his group laughing. I walked off to class feeling humiliated and violated. Most young men go through one or many experiences like that and it can shake you to the very core of your being. I don't recall telling anyone about that experience till I was over forty, not my parents, not a friend, not my wife—but I sure remember it. And those memories aren't just here. They go deep.

James Dobson says the walls that you find around most men were erected by them in the Jr. High years of life. At that season of life kids become fiercely competitive as they try to find out how they rank with their peers. And Jr. High kids are vicious. They tear each other to shreds as they desperately try to climb the social ladder by being cool, comical, tough, pretty or athletic. We get hurt so badly and so frequently through Jr. High and high school that when we get out of school and get past the dating game we determine to never again let anybody too close. We are terrified by the risk of rejection. So we draw up into shells. We build walls around us. Walls of silence and small talk and solitude and a preoccupation with things. And within these walls we feel safe, but we pay a great price for this safety: loneliness, boredom, and a vague sense of uselessness. As persons we become less joyful. As Christians we become weaker. God did not make man to live alone. We are social beings. We are created with a need for intimacy. For some of you that need is met, in part, by a husband or a wife. But listen now, to expect one person to meet your entire social need is to put excessive strain on that one relationship ®. It will weaken the one leg you are trying to stand on. Frederick Herwaldt, in a Christianity Today article writes: *Marriage is not a totally fulfilling relationship. Marriage partners in today's increasingly mobile society often find themselves removed from family and friends who have provided additional emotional support. Without new friends or relationships to fill the void, husbands and wives must rely on each other alone for support. Many marriages crumble from that weight. But it is vitally important that marriage partners do not expect their spouses to provide all their emotional support, and that marriage itself does not discourage the development of other relationships.*

The whole point here is that whoever you are, you need friends. That's not just good sense; it is also biblical. Ecclesiastes 4:**9-10** *Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. 10 For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up.* The friendless male or female is likely to experience a personal crash. **11** *Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone?* One of the reasons that friendlessness is such a problem today is that we have gadgets to meet our needs. Today, we answer verse 11 with central air and heat, or electric blankets. Our gadgets will keep us warm, Oprah will be our friend, and, if we fall, Uncle Sam will come along to pick us up. 4:**12** *And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.* Relational bonds make us stronger don't they? Christian friends are a defense against Satan. Here's a riddle. What is better than a friend? Two friends, three

friends, a whole group of buds who support each other. It is a fact of life really should face - spiritually, socially, emotionally, we need friends and too few of us are well-supplied. Our fast-paced, affluent, faceless society only increases the problem. When Lyndon Johnson left the White House back in the 60s reporters asked him why he was moving back to Texas. He said to them, *Down there, when you're sick, folks come to see you and when you die, they cry.* True, caring friends - you need them. And our Lord, who made us with this need has made a provision for it.

Our Lord has provided for the social needs of his children, not through Twitter, but in the church. This is point #2. We've seen the human need for intimacy; now we see the Lord's provision. For each human desire, there is a God ordained fulfillment of it and many of our needs are to be met by the loving, worshipping, serving community of believers in the church. Now, if your concept of church is like that of most people you are wondering how in the world church meets any longings for intimacy. What is intimate about coming to a building once a week and sitting with others in rows of chairs or pews and listening to someone read Scripture and tells stories and sing? Nothing is intimate about that. Little is there to promote friendships, but that is not all there is to the biblical church. The true church is not so much a theatre as a fraternity. Look at what I mean. At the end of Acts 2 there is a description of how the local church operated when under the leadership of the apostles and infused by the Holy Spirit. It says they were devoted to fellowship. They were constantly in each other's homes. They were eating together. Do you think some fast and hearty friendships developed? You better believe it. Even among men? Of course, among men.

My point is that when the church is being the church the kind of activities that foster significant relationships will take place. In Romans 12 there is a list of things followers of Jesus are exhorted to do with respect to the church. It includes being devoted in brotherly love, giving preference to each other in honor, praying together, practicing hospitality, rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep. This is what should mark the family of God. This is the kind of sharing together in ministry, the kind of sharing in the joys and trials of life that will knit people together as one. And I would suggest to you that most of what is described here cannot go on in a group of several hundred. To be the body of Christ that can do these things we must be meeting together in tighter units, in groups that allow for some sharing and communication, where the joys and sorrow, the needs and dreams, the prayers and praises of individuals can be known and expressed. Galatians 6:**2a** *Bear one another's burdens.* You can't do that for people you hardly

know. You can't do that for 200 people! But it is still a requirement for a disciple. And that takes us straight to points 3 and 4, the duty of the church and the duty of the believer.

The church's duty, or the duty of the leaders of the church, in light of the need among us for intimacy, and in light of the Scriptural view of church life, is to provide structures in which a Romans 12 kind of life may be lived. We must provide opportunities for men and women to develop friendships and some degree of closeness. There is a human hunger for intimacy and if people can't find it in churches many will look for it in bars. Men and women thrive in a setting where they know others care about them. But the truth that somebody cares is not often communicated in church services. It can be communicated there. We can do a lot better at loving each other when we gather on Sunday. But I must add as well, that you can only do so much in this setting. Our Sunday morning service is not designed to foster intimacy. That is not its purpose. The opportunities to relate will occur more in Sunday School and more yet in our small groups.

The small group or care group ministries of our church are there precisely to foster a Romans 12 kind of fellowship, an Acts 2 kind of fellowship. Not all of them are alike. We have groups for study and for prayer and for accountability. We have groups for women only, and men only and singles only. And it is in these groups, more than any other place in the church's life, that real friendships are formed. In a care group you find someone to give you counsel, someone to pray with you, someone to share the word of God and the love of God with you.

In addition to fostering friendships, the care group program is important for the families in the church. Our single people, for the most part, know how important fellowship is for them. But I want you to see the importance of cell-groups for marrieds as well. I have seen just in the last few years how marriages are strengthened and preserved by the support provided in a care group. I have seen as well how a woman was sustained by the love of her care group when she was abandoned by her husband. The love of brothers and sisters has a preventative and restorative function.

Now, we have tried, as leaders to provide the necessary structures for intimacy. We have given Bobby Brown the job of developing and overseeing our small group program. We have twenty or so groups right now, but the impact of these groups for spiritual growth and relational intimacy is not guaranteed by their mere existence. Those who control church structure must do their duty but so must the individual Christian. So I close with a look at what all this means practically for you. And I offer three applications. #1 is to stop making excuses. Those who are living a solo Christianity and those who stay away from small groups have numerous excuses. Some may be

legitimate, but most are not. One excuse or genuine reason is: “my family comes first.”® Maybe there is a child with a bedtime that is very early. In can appreciate the difficulty. Children make this a lot harder, I know. But I know too that your children need a mom and dad who are spiritually alive and vital. And to neglect your own walk with God, your own spiritual needs, in the name of the kids is a tragic mistake and a sad, sad irony. See what you can do to make it happen despite the family challenges. In the long run, that will be better for your son or daughter.

Application #2 is to turn on the *Give*. Don't just concern yourself with your own needs but look out for the interests of others. If you want people to cry when you die, then do something for someone else. And in the doing what will you find? You will find what Jesus said, “it is more blessed, it makes you happier, to give than to receive.” I challenge you today to start coming out for church meetings for the sake of others, to serve rather than to be served, to contribute your ideas, your prayers, your words of concern and encouragement even if your needs are not immediately being met. Hebrews 10:24 *consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds*. When is the last time you did this? When is the last time you came to a meeting of the church prepared to build up someone in it? 25 *not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near*. The Lord said that, not me. Build up somebody. Don't tell me you are an introvert. Don't hide behind that. I'm not an extrovert myself but I've learned that the only thing in this world worth investing your life in is -- people. Westinghouse won't last. Your car won't last. Your house won't last. Your body won't even last - only those made in God's image will last forever. Spend your energies and your time building men and women. It starts with your family, and with your own kids. No doubt about it, but it goes beyond that as well. So, Christian you turn on the give.

Application #3 is to crucify the ego. ® You know, it's possible to meet in small groups, or have dinner together and stare at each other without ever growing intimate. To grow close, to have friends, requires that we unmask and that can be scary. We are afraid because we are proud. We crave admiration so we're scared we might look ignorant or silly or dull if we open up and tell how we feel. Pride places walls all around us. You remember when sin entered the experience of Adam and Eve-- what did they do? What happened? They became ashamed of nakedness and up went the walls - fig leaf walls. How can we overcome this problem among Christians? How can we look at each other and be honest and unashamed? I remember talking to a man who has been through a divorce and as a result he no longer wants to go to church. He doesn't want new Christian friends

because as they get to know him they learn of his past. And he is tempted to isolate himself from others. What can we say to such a man? How can we expose weakness and fears and sins without being crushed by the shame? We sing to Jesus, “Thou art the way to God. Thy blood our ransom paid. In Thee we face our judge and Maker unafraid.” And if, in Christ, we can face a holy God without fear surely we can face each other without fear. As Christians we have confessed that we are unworthy sinners already. We say we believe in the forgiveness of sins and so we can be real, be open, with confidence that my spiritual family loves me and forgives me. In an atmosphere of forgiveness, intimacy can flourish and souls will be healed.

Last year at this time I stood up here and asked if you had grown in love for your fellow-believers in the previous year. Today I’m sure many of you could say “yes, I have.” I’m so delighted, I am thrilled when I see that happening. I believe our Father in heaven is as well. He calls us to be a family. So, I close with Paul’s words to the Thessalonians to whom he said, “I thank God that you love one another. But I urge you to excel still more.”