

TRUE FRIENDSHIP

MATTHEW 8:22-26

Do you ever argue with God about something He says in the Bible? There's some nasty little verses in 1 John that say, "If a man says he loves God and does not love his brother, he's a liar, because if you don't love your brother whom you have seen, how can you love God whom you've not seen?"

That used to get under my skin. I thought the whole thing was just nonsense. I could see absolutely no relationship between loving God and loving my brother or my neighbor.

But John was on to something. He knew what he was talking about. Christian love is not objective. Christian love is subjective—it's a decision to love.

Because God loves me, and I don't deserve it, I make the decision to love others. Christian love does not depend on the person being loved. It resides in the person doing the loving. Loving God is more complicated than simply saying, "I love you."

Friendship is like that. The friends in the Scripture passage today made the decision to love a blind man. Friends are not always loveable. It has to be worked at. It has to be demonstrated.

No problem is ever as dark when you have a friend to face it with you. A blind man in Bethsaida had those kinds of friends.

1. Friends can move us either closer (to) or farther from Jesus.

Mark 8:22 (NIV) They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him.

There's a world of meaning in "some people" and "begged." This shows the depth of their love. These were his friends. In a similar story four friends lowered their crippled friend through a roof to Jesus so he could be touched and healed.

The Bible says, 9“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work. 10If one falls down, his friend can help him up!” (Eccl. 4:9-10).

Jesus called his disciples his friends. Proverbs 27:6 says, Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses. True friends are honest. They tell it like it is. This is positive even when we don't like what they tell us.

Unconditional love demands commitment. “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Prov 17:17). The most remarkable thing about that verse is to see it in the context of the Proverbs...

...because Proverbs repeatedly points out the danger in false friendships. It is full of warnings not to hang out with fools because they will lead you down a path of destruction.

Examples of negative influences in Scripture include:

- * Israel listened to the bad report of 10 spies instead of Joshua and Caleb.
- * Israel wanted a king because they wanted to be like other nations, instead of the redemptive uniqueness that God desired for them.
- * Herod executed John the Baptist because he was afraid of being considered weak in front of his pagan friend.
- * Pilot listened to an angry mob who demanded that Christ be crucified instead of the convicted murderer, Barabbas.
- * Demas and Alexander harmed the ministry of the Apostle Paul because they “loved the world.”

Many of you know people who made bad decisions because of the negative influence of friends. Celebrities often discover their friends were only interested in the fame or money.

Fortunately, the blind man from Bethsaida had friends who led their blind friend closer to Jesus.

2. Friends share their faith, but they cannot lend it

Friends can push us to a closer walk with Jesus. Friends can inspire us. But friends cannot give us their faith. Their faith can never be a substitute for a personal faith in Jesus.

Notice what happens in Mark 8:23 (NIV) He (Jesus) took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village.

Jesus led the blind man away from the city and maybe his friends to experience a personal encounter with the Savior. In every church there are people who are “cultural Christians.”

For them Christianity is their heritage or habit more than devotion to Christ. Some church members lack a conviction to follow Christ because they have never been saved.

Church is just the place where they hang out for an hour or two every Sunday because that's what they've done all their lives. Our faith must be our own—not our friends or our family's.

3. Jesus' touch is more important than programs.

God cannot be put into a box. Have you noticed that the miracles we know about are all different? This is to remind us that God cannot be put into our own preconceived notions. Maybe you've heard this:

How many Baptists does it take to change a light bulb? No one knows because Baptists never change anything. Several years ago Professor and author Leonard Sweet took his laptop computer into the pulpit instead of his leather-bound, KJV Bible.

Professor Sweet explained that he had several translations, including Hebrew and Greek right there on his computer that he could refer to. But the church wouldn't budge. “No computers, only Bibles in the pulpit.”

It's ironic that we worship the Creator of the world who obviously loves and enjoys diversity and differences, yet, all too often, one of the least creative places on the planet is a Baptist church.

What is the best way to experience the power and love of God? Is it through preaching—yes; singing—yes; praying—yes; or observing the beauty of nature—yes!

Some of you experienced God in a special way while on a mission trip. Others at camp. Maybe during a choir special or teaching in VBS. I was saved at a revival meeting.

There are multiple ways to experience Jesus. Look what Jesus did with this man: Mark 8:23b (NIV) When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, “Do you see anything?” He spit on him then touched him.

I'm glad the church didn't adopt this way of conferring blessings.

He healed another man by putting mud in his eyes. Some he touched in a ceremonial fashion. For some Jesus simply spoke and demons fled and the dead were raised.

The point here is, don't put God in a box. He can touch us in many, many ways.

4. Friends don't give up on friends.

You can always tell a real friend by the fact that when you've made a fool of yourself he or she doesn't feel you've done a permanent job.

Mark 8:24-25 (NIV) 24He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." 25Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

Why did Jesus have to touch the man twice? I don't know. This is the only recorded miracle by Jesus where the healing was initially incomplete, and required a second touch by Jesus.

But there are other biblical examples where repeated efforts were necessary to accomplish God's will

Joshua marched around Jericho 13 times (Josh. 6:2-5) before the walls came down. Elijah prayed 7 times before the rain came. Jesus prayed 3 times, "Let this cup pass from me."

But what about this healing? We do know that in Matthew both Bethsaida and Chorazin are rebuked for their unwillingness to accept the ministry of Jesus.

Matthew 11:20 - 22 (TLB) 20Then he began to pour out his denunciations against the cities where he had done most of his miracles, because they hadn't turned to God. 21"Woe to you, Chorazin, and woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles I did in your streets had been done in wicked Tyre and Sidon, their people would have repented long ago in shame and humility. 22Truly, Tyre and Sidon will be better off on the Judgment Day than you!

Maybe the wickedness that so engulfed the area was a contributing factor! But there doesn't seem to be any reason to attribute this two-stage miracle to the man's lack of faith.

What I do know is that in spite of the circumstances the blind man's friends did not give up. Perhaps Jesus used this miracle to show that our own spiritual "sight" grows by stages.

For instance, the disciples, like the blind man, had been 'touched' by Jesus, but their spiritual insight and maturity were far from complete. In fact, it wasn't much better than the Pharisees. They needed a "second touch" for complete understanding.

Peter is a good example. At this point Peter was possessed with a nationalistic concept of what the Messiah would be. So, in Mark 8:31, when Jesus began to tell the disciples about his death and resurrection,