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Bridgeway Church

John 13-17 / #16

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Sermon Summary #16

What a Friend We Have in Jesus!

John 15:12-17

I've had the privilege in life to know a good many so-called "famous" people. I hesitate to say this because it may sound like name-dropping, something I deplore. The fact that God has providentially orchestrated my life so that I have had the opportunity to become friends with famous and quite successful Christians has nothing to do with me. It says nothing about me. So I mention this only to draw attention to the fact that no earthly acquaintance or friendship can come remotely close to the glory and honor and joy of being friends with Jesus. ***His is the only name worth dropping!***

That may strike some people as odd. After all, none of you here today would claim to be friends with anyone else who has already lived and died. Only a lunatic would claim to be friends with Julius Caesar or Martin Luther or Abraham Lincoln. You might know a lot about their lives. You may have studied them and read countless biographies of their contribution to human flourishing. But to say that you are "friends" with people who are long since dead, is nuts. ***So why am I not nuts when I claim to be a friend of Jesus Christ? Why are you not nuts when you make the same claim? And how is it even possible to be friends with someone who lived 2,000 years ago? And even if it were possible, what in the world does it mean to say we are "friends" with Jesus?***

One more thing. It's easy to think of Jesus as God, as Lord, as the Sovereign Master over our lives. To think of Jesus as King and Ruler is easy. To think of him as the Great Shepherd of the sheep is no challenge. To portray him as the Sacrificial Lamb of God who gives himself on the cross is entirely acceptable. But to think of him as "friend" is another matter entirely. Why? One reason is that we've all had bad friends in life. We've all suffered from their betrayal, their sins, their taking advantage of us, their breaking of a confidence. In other words, we've been hurt badly by those we thought were our friends. They were worse than fair-weather friends. Some of them turned out to be enemies who were only in our lives to use and exploit us and take advantage of us. But Jesus is a friend of an entirely different sort.

Friendship in the Bible

Before we look at what it means to say Jesus is our friend, let me say a brief word about friendship in general. People don't realize that the Bible actually has a lot to say about friendship. We read about several close friendships in Scripture, like that between Jonathan and David in the OT and between Paul and Barnabas in the NT. But the most extensive discussion of friendship is found in the book of Proverbs. So let me remind you of what we find there. Some of you will recognize what I'm about to say, because we devoted an entire Sunday morning a few years ago to looking at what Proverbs has to say about friendship. But it's a good review for all of us.

One thing that Proverbs makes clear right from the start is that ***although friendship is critically important, it isn't easy to experience.*** "Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love, but a faithful man who can find?" (Proverbs 20:6). It's one thing for someone to loudly proclaim their loyalty to you; but be careful; don't give your heart to someone until there is an established pattern and history of devotion and sincerity and sacrifice. Friendship is also crucially important because in it we gain the wise counsel of people who care about us and can perhaps see things from a different angle.

"Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety" (Proverbs 11:14).

"Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed" (Proverbs 15:22).

We read in Proverbs 27:9 that "oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel." This text tells us that just as simple luxuries like perfume and oil bring a sweet and enjoyable blessing to life, so too does a friend who gives us counsel out of his experience and wisdom and maturity in life. In friendship we experience both moral and mental refinement. Friends sharpen our souls.

"Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17).

"Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy" (Proverbs 27:6).

In spite of what you think you need, I assure you that you don't want to be surrounded by a bunch of yes-men who shout glad-hearted approval of everything you say and cater to your every whim. What each of us needs is not all-accepting and unqualified approval of everything we do and say but a loving honesty that is often blunt. By ourselves we become dull and fuzzy and we lose our edge. We need friends who will resist the temptation to flatter us and will speak truth in order to refine us.

“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Proverbs 17:17).

In friendship we are blessed with the constancy of genuine love. A brother, which is to say a family member to whom you are related by blood, will be there when adversity comes; his connection is deep and he will not be frightened off by hard times. But better still is a friend who loves “at all times,” whether in adversity or prosperity. All that being said, we are also warned in Proverbs about trying to become close friends with everyone. It’s actually dangerous to do so. You may have numerous companions and acquaintances in life, but keep your close friends few. This is what we see in Proverbs 18:24 –

“A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24).

If you try to multiply friends indiscriminately, you will sooner or later get the wrong kind. The warning isn't against having friends, but against multiplying friends out of a misguided desire to be liked by everyone. One true friend is superior to a multitude of casual acquaintances. It may be great that you know everyone and everyone knows you. That feels good. But don't assume this means they are the sort who will sacrifice everything for you when you are in a crisis. The word translated “sticks closer” means to cling to, to adhere tightly to, never to abandon or betray. That is the sort of friend you most need, and they are almost always in short supply. So cherish them when you find them.

There is also an important lesson in Proverbs 25:19 –

“Trusting in a treacherous man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth or a foot that slips” (Proverbs 25:19).

Nothing hurts quite like the disloyalty and betrayal of someone you trusted. It's like a decaying, rotten tooth and a palsied, disjointed foot. Not only are they functionally useless (for chewing and walking), they hurt! That is why Proverbs tells us that ***there are some people with whom you should never be friends***. Avoid them like the plague! The first group to avoid are the evil, the wicked.

“Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil. Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on” (Proverbs 4:14-15).

“Be not envious of evil men, nor desire to be with them, for their hearts devise violence, and their lips talk of trouble” (Proverbs 24:1-2).

Stay away from the fool! He says in Proverbs 14:7 that we should “leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge” (Proverbs 14:7). He has in mind the person who hates knowledge, is unteachable, arrogant, is not open to rebuke, has a flippant attitude toward sin, and is impetuous and deceitful. The hot-tempered are also a poor choice for close friends.

“Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare” (Proverbs 22:24-25).

You must also steer clear of the person given to excess.

“Hear, my son, and be wise, and direct your heart in the way. Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat, for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags” (Proverbs 23:19-21).

Don't restrict this to eating/drinking. It includes anyone who lacks self-control: the person addicted to video games, the woman who is a shop-aholic, the man who spends excessive time with his hobby to the neglect of his family, etc.

Close, intimate, trusting friendships are hard to maintain. That is why Proverbs speaks clearly on how to treat your friends. One consistent theme in Proverbs is the importance of being generous when your friends are in need.

“Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, ‘Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it’—when you have it with you” (Proverbs 3:27-28).

“Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor” (Proverbs 14:21).

If a friend is in desperate need and you are in a position to help, don't defer the gift; it increases the worries of the one in need and intensifies his embarrassment and shame in having to ask for help. Provide the gift without making him feel as if he's now in your debt.

But the really, really good news is that *Jesus does all this and more*. Each of these characteristics of a godly friend is true of Jesus. He is faithful, he provides us with wise counsel when we are confused, he always speaks the truth

when we need to hear it, he perseveres with us through trial and tragedy, he is good, he doesn't have a quick temper but is patient and long-suffering, and he is indescribably generous.

Friendship with Jesus

What concerns us this morning is what it means to be friends with Jesus. Before I address that point, let me say something about *how it is even possible to maintain a close, intimate friendship with someone whom you can't see, someone who lived and died 2,000 years ago*. Here is why. Here is how.

First, Jesus is just as much alive today as he was when he walked the earth. Indeed, he is more alive today because he has been raised from the dead and lives in a glorified body at the right hand of the Father. People often ask me if their loved ones who have died and are in heaven can see and hear and know what is happening on earth. The simple answer is: I don't know. Maybe. But I know with absolute certainty that Jesus sees and knows everything. He is at every moment aware of every word we speak, every thought that passes through our minds, every circumstance we face day in and day out. Not even your closest earthly friends can do that. But Jesus is omniscient. He knows everything! He sees everything! He sovereignly rules over every detail of your daily existence.

Second, as we saw earlier in John 14, although Jesus is not physically present on earth he is spiritually present in us through the indwelling presence of the person of the Holy Spirit. He has not abandoned the disciples and he has not abandoned you and me. He is here, with us and in us at all times through the Spirit whom he sent to indwell us. Jesus is closer to me than my best of friends. He is closer to me than my own wife. And so he is to you as well, if you know him as Savior.

Third, Jesus constantly communicates with us. We are in communication with Jesus through prayer. He hears every groan, every sigh, every request, every utterance whether spoken or silent. But we are also in communication with Jesus when he speaks to us. He speaks to us every time we open this book, this inspired and written revelation of who he is and what he has promised always to do for us. I'm hearing Jesus speak to me right now. For example, he is talking to me and to you right now when we read a verse like John 15:13 – "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." It's as if Jesus is saying, "Sam, my love for you is unparalleled. It is immeasurable. It is eternal. It is greater than all other love that you will experience on earth. And you can rest assured of that because I went to the cross for you and suffered the wrath and judgment of God that you deserved to suffer, but now never will." The point simply is that Jesus sustains our close and intimate friendship with him by listening when we talk to him and by talking to us through Scripture and also through the voice of the Spirit who lives inside us.

Fourth, Jesus constantly prays for us. You know you have a good friend on earth when they commit to praying for you, perhaps weekly or even daily. But sometimes they forget. Sometimes life becomes so busy that they fail to find time to pray for you in a meaningful and sustained manner. But not Jesus. Paul said it plainly in Romans 8:34 –

“Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us” (Rom. 8:34).

The author of Hebrews makes the same point:

“Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).

Fifth, Jesus is our ever-present friend because he lives to keep us safe and labors to ensure that we will never fall beyond his grace or love. Paul put it this way in Romans 5:10 –

“For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life” (Rom. 5:10).

In other words, the life of Jesus at this very moment and throughout the duration of your earthly existence serves to keep you safe and secure and reconciled to the Father. Now that’s friendship!

Sixth, we see the reality of Christ’s friendship with us in Paul’s declaration that no matter how difficult or prosperous his circumstances may be, he “can do all things through him (i.e., through Christ) who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13). Jesus lives to give you strength for everything you need to do. He is always present. He is never too busy. He is never inadequate for the task. He will never put you off or tell you to call back next week. He will never treat you as if you were a meddlesome or bothersome intruder into his life. ***He lives always to pray for you, to strengthen you, to love you, to listen to your complaints and prayers, to supply you with everything you need to do what he has commanded. Have any of you ever had a friend like that? I haven’t.***

Seventh, let me mention one more way in which we experience the friendship of Jesus that surpasses anything an earthly friend could provide. When Paul was in prison, only days away from being executed by having his head severed from his body, he told Timothy, his young protégé, of how those he regarded as his friends were nowhere to be found when he needed them most. Listen to his words:

“Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. Alexander the

coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message. At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! ***But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me***, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (2 Timothy 4:9-18).

What powerful words concerning the friendship of Jesus with his people: “But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me!” And that’s not just true of what Jesus might do for an apostle. It’s what he promises always to do for every one of us who knows him as Lord and Savior.

Five Truths concerning our Friendship with Jesus

As we turn our attention back to John 15:12-17, I want you to see five things that Jesus himself says about what it means to be friends with him.

(1) Our friendship with Jesus is only possible because of the sacrifice he made for us on the cross. Friendship is the fruit of atonement, and atonement is the expression of love (vv. 12-13).

This is what Jesus is saying in vv. 12-13. But his statement provokes a question. What was it about Jesus dying for his friends that made it an expression of the greatest love imaginable? How can we today know that when Jesus died for us it was the consummate expression of love?

The answer obviously depends on what he did in dying for us. There are many today who have rejected the doctrine of the penal substitutionary atonement of Christ for sinners. The doctrine of PSA simply means that when he died on the cross he suffered the penalty of God’s judgment that we deserved and in doing so satisfied or propitiated the wrath of God against us. Now that is love!

But, as I said, many have turned against this, arguing that he died for us primarily to set an example of what self-sacrifice for others really is. Yes, he did that, but what would that “sacrifice” be if not dying in our place, dying the death we deserved, dying as our substitute?

Others say he died for us in the sense that he gave us an example of how we should love others and serve others, or that he died to motivate us to live godly lives, or that he died to defeat Satan and deliver us from the grip of our

Enemy, or that he died to restore in us the image of God that was defaced by Adam's fall. But how would such a death be the "greatest love" imaginable? *What makes Christ's death for us the expression of a love beyond anything anyone could imagine is that in dying in your place he delivered you from eternal damnation. In dying in your place, as your substitute, he exhausted in himself the holy wrath of a holy God and secured your eternal forgiveness of sins.*

(2) Our friendship with Jesus is confirmed and seen in our commitment to do what he has commanded us. And he has commanded us to love one another as he has loved us (v. 14).

Look again at v. 14. What is the meaning of the word "**if**" in this verse? Does Jesus mean you must do what he commands you to do **in order to become** his friend? That is one possible meaning of the word "if". It's the sort of "if" that we have in mind when we speak of a cause that produces an effect. For example:

"If you hit the baseball hard enough it will fly over the centerfield fence and out of the park."

"If you give me enough money I will be able to pay off my mortgage."

"If you will be nice to me I will in turn be nice to you."

Is that what Jesus means? No, by no means never! And again I say, No! Here in v. 14 Jesus uses the word "if" to give expression to a **confirmation** or **proof** that something is true. For example:

"If your blood pressure is lower it means the medicine your Doctor prescribed is working."

"If you are in remission of your cancer it means the chemotherapy has done its job."

Or, to use a biblical example:

"For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end" (Heb. 3:14).

In other words, Jesus is not saying, "If you do what I command it will lead you to becoming a friend with me." Rather, he is saying, ***"If you do what I command it proves that you are one of my friends." It confirms the truth that you are my friend. Doing what I command is the fruit or evidence that you are truly my friend.***

How do we know this is what Jesus means by the word "if"? We know it because of what he has already said in v. 12. We are to love one another "as" he has *already* loved us. We are able to love only because we have been loved by him, as seen in him giving his life for us. Our love is the effect of being loved. We do not love others so that Jesus will then love us. Jesus has already demonstrated his love for us when he gave himself on the cross in our place. And just as he has already loved us so sacrificially, we in turn are to love one another. Christ's laying down of his life comes first and produces in us the loving of others which is the doing of his command.

So, Jesus is saying something like this: ***You can be assured that you are my friend and that my death counts for you, if my love for you and my death for you have transformed and motivated you to love others just as I loved you. If you love other Christians as I loved you, you are giving evidence that my death has had a saving, life-changing impact on you, and in this way you demonstrate that you are my friends.***

(3) Our friendship with Jesus is seen in his loving disclosure and revelation to us of the heart and will of our Heavenly Father (v. 15).

Someone might easily misunderstand v. 14 and conclude that Jesus is saying we must do what he has commanded because, after all, we are only his servants, his slaves, here to do his will without hesitation or thought. Jesus quickly refutes any such notion in v. 15 by saying, "You are not like slaves to me, here to do whatever I say. You are my friends. And you can be assured of this by virtue of the fact that I don't hide anything from you. I reveal to you everything my Father has shown me and spoken to me."

In a relationship between a master and his servant, the servant will be kept in the dark. His relationship is one where he is simply asked to do whatever his master says. There is no intimacy. There is no sharing of life. There is no mutual love and fellowship. But in the sort of friendship that we now have with Jesus, he has made known to us the nature of our heavenly Father. He has disclosed what God the Father is like and what he feels for us and what he has promised to do for us.

(4) Our friendship with Jesus is the result of his sovereign choice of us, not ours of him (v. 16).

Although this has special and immediate application to those apostles present in the upper room with Jesus, it applies with no less force to all of us who are now called to be the friends of Jesus. So what does Jesus mean by this?

On the one hand, it is certainly true that the disciples “chose” to follow Jesus. Jesus didn’t drag them bound and gagged into the circle of disciples. They made a choice to believe in him and follow him. So too did we.

But I think his point is that *behind, beneath, and before any decision that they or we have made to believe in Jesus and follow him lies his sovereign choice in selecting us and setting his affection upon us and empowering us to do what he has commanded us to do.* “The ultimate reason you found my message appealing,” says Jesus, “and chose to take up your cross and follow me is because my Father and I, through the power of the Holy Spirit, worked in your hearts to give you a saving knowledge of who I am.” This is just another way of saying what Jesus said earlier in Matthew 11 –

“All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt. 11:27).

He says this, then, to encourage them with the assurance that whatever he asks them to do, no matter how challenging and painful it may be, he stands ready, able, and willing to supply them and us with the power to obey. After all, his honor is at stake in our obedience. He chose them and us and appointed them and us to live in obedience to what he has commanded. And we know that whatever God requires, he provides.

(5) Our friendship with Jesus results in our bearing the fruit of godly living and effective prayer (vv. 16-17).

One of the purposes for Jesus choosing his people is so that they might be enabled by his gracious power and the Holy Spirit to bear godly and righteous fruit, the sort of obedient life that remains and abides, and in doing so brings honor and praise to his named. Does Jesus have any particular kind of fruit-bearing in mind? Yes. Although we wouldn’t restrict it to this, he surely has in view our love for one another. We know this because of v. 12, and again by v. 17 – “These things I command you, so that you will love one another.”

We should also remember that the ultimate end or goal in our bearing the fruit of love and godly living is so that the Father may be glorified and praised and seen as majestic and holy. Back in John 15:8 Jesus said this: “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” (John 15:8).

Therefore, the ultimate aim in Jesus choosing us and dying for us and calling us his friends and empowering us to bear the fruit of godly living is so that the Father might be honored and exalted and praised!