

BIBLE PASSAGE AND READING FOR FEBRUARY 7, 2024
SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP AND COMMUNITY

BIBLE PASSAGE & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Hebrews 10:24-25

24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

1. What TRUTHS do I need to BELIEVE about God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), myself, or the world?
2. What SINS do I need to REPENT of doing or seek to avoid?
3. What ACTIONS will I take to OBEY the truths I have observed or learned?

SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

Pastor and writer Francis Chan shares this story: “A while back a former gang member came to our church. He was heavily tattooed and rough around the edges, but he was curious to see what church was like. He had a relationship with Jesus and seemed to get fairly involved with the church. After a few months, I found out the guy was no longer coming to the church. When asked why he didn’t come anymore, he gave the following explanation: ‘I had the wrong idea of what church was going to be like. When I joined the church, I thought it was going to be like joining a gang. You see, in the gangs we weren’t just nice to each other once a week—we were family.’ That killed me because I knew that what he expected is what the church is intended to be. It saddened me to think that a gang could paint a better picture of commitment, loyalty, and family than the local church body.”²

We have a crisis of community today and not just within the church. Social commentators from every sector have observed that a radical individualism typifies our cultural moment, breeding rampant isolationism and loneliness. We celebrate autonomy, independence, and individualism, a word which Alexis de Tocqueville, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, famously observed did not even exist in prior societies. We need look no further than our social media platforms which signal our inborn yearning for connection all while guaranteeing their superficiality, with friends and follows just a click away and with carefully curated posts and pictures screaming for affirming likes and loves. “We are all so much together, but we are all dying of loneliness.”³

Tragically, the life of the church and the disciple have not been spared. We instinctively privatize our faith, conceiving of the gospel on primarily personal terms. We’re exhorted to preach the gospel to ourselves, which is exactly what we’ve done through the first six lessons: Remember that you are righteous and beloved! You are united with Christ! The Spirit dwells in you! And that is all gloriously true and undeniably central to our discipleship. Yet I suspect we are less often exhorted to preach the gospel to one another. And so we get to a verse like James 5:16, “. . . confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed,” and don’t know quite what to do. Do we confess our sins to one another? Do we believe there is healing in corporate confession? Can it be that we have overemphasized the personal dimension of the gospel to the neglect of the corporate?

If we have, it is certainly not because the New Testament has suggested we do so. Take adoption, which we’ve said is the highest privilege the gospel offers. It is not simply that we have a new Father, but that we have a new family, brothers and sisters whom our God is also pleased to call his children. We have now an enduring family that can rejoice together, pray together, and weep together; a family we are called to love and serve, admonish and encourage. That’s adoption too.

Or take our union with Christ, which we’ve said is what actually makes us Christians. We are not only united to Christ by the indwelling Holy Spirit, we are united to one another! We are one body with Christ as its head (1 Cor. 12:12–27); we are branches with Christ as our vine (John 15); we are joined together as a temple with Christ as its cornerstone (Eph. 2:19–22). Paul writes more explicitly, we are “members one of another” (Rom. 12:5). We are radically interdependent; incomplete without one another. It’s not simply, “Be one,” functionally. It’s “You are one,” ontologically. So, live that out! There is simply no biblical conception of discipleship that is strictly private or personal. Discipleship occurs in community and gospel community begins with spiritual friendship.

The Need for Friendship

Ralph Waldo Emerson observed, “Every man passes his life in search after friendship.”⁴ This universal longing finds its origin in the Garden where everything was good, save one thing: “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18). God created us to need relationships, for we are created in the image of the one who said, “Let us make man in our image” (Gen. 1:27). In the very being of God—between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—there is

community: an eternal friendship of divine persons who perfectly delight in one another. We desire intimate friendships because God made us like himself. We have an urgent, inborn need for friendships.

The irony is that while friendship is desired by all, it is valued by few. In *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis observes that while the ancient world prized friendship above all else, the modern world virtually ignores it. Why? Friendship, Lewis notes, is the least natural of the loves: “The least instinctive, biological and necessary; there is nothing throaty about it, nothing that quickens the pulse or turns you red and pale. Without sexual love, none of us would be here; but we can live and breed without friendship.”⁵ Strictly speaking, friendship isn’t necessary, or at least doesn’t strike us as being necessary. But above all, Lewis argues that the primary reason we diminish its importance is this: “Few value it because few experience it.”⁶

Before you object, “I have a lot of friends,” let me explain: what most of us have are companions, and there is an important difference. Companions are those with whom we share life circumstances: work, hobbies, life stage, or geography. Companionship is the matrix of friendship. It’s where friendships are discovered, but it’s not friendship. That’s not to disparage companionship. We don’t disparage silver by distinguishing it from gold. It’s just to say that shared circumstances may promote very friendly and mutually beneficial exchanges, but that is still not friendship. So what then is spiritual friendship that creates gospel community?

The Heart of Friendship

Passion. In *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis writes:

“Friendship arises when companions discover that they have in common some insight or even taste which others do not share, and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure or burden. The typical expression of opening friendship would be something like, “What? You too? I thought I was the only one.” . . . We picture lovers face to face, absorbed in each other, but Friends side by side, absorbed in some common interest. Their eyes look ahead. That is why those pathetic people who simply “want friends” can never make any. The very condition of having friends is that we should want something else besides Friends. There would be nothing for the friendship to be about; and Friendship must be about something . . . those who are going nowhere can have no fellow travelers.”⁷

The passion, the “You too!” of spiritual friendship is the discovery of a shared and ultimate passion to be like Jesus. It is what we want above all else for ourselves and for the other: I want to see Christ formed in you! With how many of our companions can this be said to be true?

Loyalty. Aelred of Rievaulx writes, “Nothing is more praiseworthy in friendship than loyalty. Loyalty is hidden in prosperity but conspicuous in adversity. A friend is tested in necessity. A rich man’s friends abound, but whether they are true friends adversity proves.”⁸ 1 Sam. 18:3 records, “Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul.” A covenant means I am committed to you. I am bound to you. It is a solemn commitment and is one reason you can’t have many friends: you can’t tell ten people, “I’ll be there no matter what.”

Honesty. A friend is honest with you. We all have blind spots for which we need to deputize a few friends to reflect back what we cannot see for ourselves, a “hunting license” so to speak: “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses” (Prov. 27:6, NIV). A friend is also honest before you. Friends let you into their confidence, their fears, and their feelings: “David rose . . . and fell on his face to the ground . . . and they kissed one another and wept with one another” (1 Sam. 20:41). A friend lets you in, knocks on the closed doors of your life, and demands “Let me in!”

Sacrifice. Consider what his friendship with David cost Jonathan: not only his status, not only his standing with his father, but it cost him the kingdom: “And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to

David” (1 Sam. 18:4). When Jonathan took off his princely robe, he was abdicating his claim to the throne. It’s not, “Your friendship is more to me than my success;” it was, “Your friendship is more to me than my kingdom!” “You shall be King over Israel, and I will be next to you” (1 Sam. 23:17). Friendship for Jonathan was costly.

The Power for Friendship

So how many friends do we actually have? I suspect few of us believe we have, much less are, a friend like Jonathan. But in the gospel, we have a friend far greater than Jonathan. Jesus says to his disciples, “No longer do I call you servants . . . but I have called you friends” (John 15:15). If you are a Christian, you are a friend of Jesus. Jesus is your friend, passionate and loyal, honest to you and before you. And if the wounds of a friend are faithful, how much more faithful are the wounds taken by a friend. In the Upper Room, Jesus makes a covenant with us: “This cup is the new covenant sealed by my blood . . .” (Luke 22:20, NIV). And like Jonathan, Jesus took off his robe. Jesus gave up his crown rights to give us the kingdom.

When you understand that Jesus is the friend you’ve always wanted, then Jesus’ friendship frees you to become the friend you’ve always wanted. You can be transparent. You can be loyal. And you can love as you have been loved. As disciples, we follow Christ on a journey of personal transformation, but it is a journey that none can make alone. Spiritual friends accompany each other on this sacred journey as two together with Christ as their bond.⁹

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the reading that was particularly challenging or helpful for you?
2. What is the difference between a companion and a friend? What makes the quality of friendship discussed in the reading so difficult to find?
3. What makes a friendship a distinctively “Christian friendship”? How will you pursue the type of friends and community the reading presents as necessary for growth as a disciple?

Notes:

1. Portions of this lesson, including the Reading, the Bible Study, and the Exercise are adapted from the lesson “Spiritual Friendship,” Gospel Foundations, 69–77, co-written by the author and Rankin Wilbourne.
2. Francis Chan, *Forgotten God*, 152.
3. Attributed to Albert Schweitzer.
4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays*, 371.
5. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 58.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 65.
8. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, 74.
9. See also, Timothy Keller, “The Friends,” preached on February 8, 2004.