

We all have a lot of people that we know; a lot of acquaintances. But how many friends do we have? Most of us only have room for a handful of friends in our lives. Out of that group we are really fortunate if we have one or two true friends. A true friend is that person who loves you as they love themselves. Being and having a true friend is one of the highest yielding investments you can make in life. The old saying is true, to have a friend, be a friend.

There are at least three major obstacles that prevent us from developing true friendships. The first obstacle is "Ego land," the place where society teaches us to live. From early on we've been taught to look out for ourselves. One of the first questions that we ask is, "What's in it for me?" Many of today's friendships are about "networking." What works in the business world doesn't work so well if we look for friends who can advance our career or connect us powerful or influential people. If our "network" isn't working, we go looking for new friends who can work to our advantage. But this approach forgets the purpose of friendships. A true friend doesn't ask, "What's in it for me?" A true friend asks, "What's in it for you?" When we live in "Ego land" it is hard to rejoice at the success of a friend, especially when their success means that we didn't.

"No Down Elevator" could be the name for the second obstacle to true friendships. Taking the elevator down in a relationship allows us to reach deeper levels of truth and trust. Most friendships start on the façade level of small talk about the weather, sports, or other superficial things. Some of these relationships move down to the acquaintance level where we reveal some of our personal views on things like religion, politics and marriage. It is much harder to take the elevator to the third floor down, the friendship level where we begin to share some of our feelings, but hold back on the deeper ones. The fourth floor of true friendship is a difficult level to reach because it is opening our lives, our failures and shortcomings, our hopes and dreams to another person. It takes a lot of time and trust to reach this level.

The third obstacle is called "Personal Sacrifice." True friends are willing to pay the price to be a friend. They are willing to invest themselves and their time in the relationship. In our culture where money is time and time is money, the cost of true friendship is great sacrifice. Most people are not willing to make that kind of sacrifice on an ongoing basis. Not Jonathan and David.

Before David became King, he had a true friend in Jonathan, the son of King Saul. Everybody needs a Jonathan. Proverbs 18:24 describes a true friend with these words, "**A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.**" Jonathan was a true friend to David because he was willing to make a sacrifice for his friend. If Jonathan lived in "Egoland," he would have never stood by David when his father, King Saul, wanted to kill David. After all, Jonathan was the heir apparent to the throne. But David threatened to take over the throne. Jonathan was willing to sacrifice his personal power and prestige for his friend.

Jonathan also defended David when he couldn't defend himself. 1 Samuel 19:4 tells us, "Jonathan spoke with his father about David, saying many good things about him. 'The king must not sin against his servant David,' Jonathan said. 'He's never done anything to harm you. He has always helped you in any way he could.'" But that is not all; Jonathan was a constant source of encouragement to David. He supported his friend in the good times and the bad. When King Saul was out to kill David, Jonathan found his friend and encouraged him to find strength in his faith in God.

The Gospels tell us about a paralyzed man who had not one, but four good friends. (Mark 2:1-12) His friends carried him to Jesus. When they couldn't get the man into the house where Jesus was staying, they climbed the roof, dug a hole through the top and lowered the man before Jesus. They sacrificed their time and even public ridicule to help this man. They saw something in him that no one else did; otherwise they would have never taken the time and energy to bring him to Jesus. I'm sure they had to encourage him to go with them. Their efforts for their friend paid off because Jesus healed him on the spot.

Jesus is our true friend. Whether you think of it in the terms of the hymn, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," or you think of the praise song, "I'm a Friend of God ... He Calls Me Friend," Jesus is our friend. He certainly made the ultimate sacrifice for us as He left heaven for earth. He exchanged His heavenly throne for a Roman cross and stone tomb. Jesus said, "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13) That is exactly what Jesus did. But that is not all. Jesus is our mediator and defender. He doesn't accuse us or condemn us for the sinful and evil things that we do. He paid the debt for our sins. He is our mediator and defender. Jesus forgives us and sets us free to walk the new life of faith. He sets us free from the power and control of sin to live the new life of faith.

A true friend is ...

- Loyal when it is hard to be loyal.
- The first to call in good times and in bad.
- Gives without asking to be repaid.
- Walks with you in all the seasons of life.
- Helps you face whatever comes in life.

If you don't have a friend like that right now, ask God to give you one. And if you aren't a friend like that to someone else, ask God to help you become one. The time and energy we spend on true friendships are high yield investments. Next week our series on High Yield Investments will ask "Who's Your Timothy? You Need a Protégé!" Amen.