The Anatomy of Friendship

Introduction

“I’ve listened to someone as young as 14 and someone as old as 100 talk about their close friends, and [there are] three expectations of a close friend that I hear people describing and valuing across the entire life course,” says William Rawlins, the Stocker Professor of Interpersonal Communication at Ohio University. “Somebody to talk to, someone to depend on, and someone to enjoy. These expectations remain the same, but the circumstances under which they’re accomplished change.” This is interesting because friendships are voluntary and informal yet so essential to many people’s happiness. (Taken from an article The atlantic.com How Friendships Change in Adulthood “We need to catch up soon!” by JULIE BECK OCTOBER 22, 2015).

God is interested in who we spend our time with, therefore there must be a theology for this. There are degrees of friendship. Some people are associates and others are very close. We call these “besties”. That’s why the bible says, “There is a friend that sticks closer than a brother.” It doesn’t say that every friend does. It’s quite tough when someone has an expectation of deep friendship and the other person wants them to be just an acquaintance. There are certain terms the bible uses that are associated with friendship but not necessarily friendship in the full sense. Eg companion, those you walk with, those with whom you associate. There is a biblical expectation that husbands and wives should be friends. Research has found that friendship is a key factor in happy marriages. It is interesting that what some people describe as friends others will call acquaintances. So we have different value equivalents to what friendship is. I remember someone years ago who would describe many people as very good friends yet she didn’t always know the latest thing happening in their lives. It’s also important to note that friendship is not exclusive. In other words, I don’t have to have one best friend. I can choose with whom I share my secrets. It’s not like junior school where people place rules on who you are allowed to be friends with. It comes from the word raah which in scripture is friend, companion, fellow or neighbour (it can also be used for husband).

William Rawlins says that any new friends people might make in middle age are likely to be grafted onto other kinds of relationships—as with co-workers, or parents of their children’s friends—because it’s easier for time-strapped adults to make friends when they already have an excuse to spend time together. As a result, the “making friends” skill can atrophy.

The four scriptures below show us that our friends tend to influence us. God calls us to be selective about our friends because we tend to learn their ways.

1 Cor 15:33
Do not be misled: “Bad company corrupts good character.”

Prov 12:26
The righteous choose their friends carefully, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.

Prov 22:24 – 25
Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn their ways and get yourself ensnared.

Prov 13:20
Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.

The purpose of this message is to provoke you to select the right friends and to be a godly friend yourself. In other words, what should you look for in a friend and what kind of friend should you be? So let’s explore the biblical qualities of a good friendship.

1. Mutual Loyalty

2 Kings 2:2
Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel.
Prov 17:17
A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity.
It is interesting here that friendship is likened to brotherhood.

What are some signs of loyalty?
- You defend each other
- You stick with them in both good times and bad times
- You never betray them
- You back them even if it puts your reputation at risk
- You are consistent in how you relate to them regardless of who is there

Have you ever been betrayed? How has this betrayal affected you and your behaviour?

2. Mutual support
Job 2:11
When Job’s three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him.

What do you do when you hear that your friend is in trouble?

Eccl 4: 9 – 10
9 Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: 10 If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.

- Are you better because of your friends?
- Can you think of a time when they helped you up?
- Can you think of a time when you helped them up?
- Which way round is it usually?

3. Mutual Growth
John 15:15
I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

Jesus learned from His Father and then passed this on to the disciples. This sharing of ideas, mysteries of the kingdom was what made Him say they were friends and not servants. Friends spur each other on to growth.

When was the last time you passed on what you knew to your friends? “Friends are the bacon bits in the salad bowl of life.”

4. Empathy
This includes Attunement. In sync with each other. Empathy comes from two Latin words meaning “feeling into”.

Rom 12:15
Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

Are you in sync with those you call friends? When they succeed are you rejoicing with them or are you envious? Which of your friends are going through mourning or grief of any sort? Are you there for them?

There are 3 types of empathy; emotional empathy (I feel you); Cognitive empathy (I get you) and Empathic Concern (I am here for you practically).
5. Mutual enjoyment

This includes having a good sense of humour and recreational companionship.

- Do you enjoy their company?
- Are there things you do that cause people not to enjoy your company?
- Are you easy to be around?

“Sometimes having fun with your best friend is the only therapy you need.”

It’s useful knowing that a friend is someone you have common interests with or else you will think that everyone you go to for counsel is a friend. You walk with friends. They are your companion in activities beyond yourselves.

6. Sacrificial love

John 15:12 – 13

12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

Sacrifice: This needs to be mutual. We often associate sacrifice with family or marriage but here Jesus shows that it is appropriate even in friendship. True friends are willing to make sacrifices willingly. Instead of complaining let this be a value. Jesus endorses it here.

Love: In healthy friendship your sense of self-acceptance is reinforced. You feel that they love you for who you are (warts and all) and not what you can do or give. You feel liked without having to be someone you are not. When you have to perform in a friendship the situation becomes very stressful.

7. Mutual Trust

- Functional Trust
  
  Prov 18:24

  One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

- Relational Trust (Mutual Disclosure and transparency)

  John 15:15

  I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you

Do you keep things confidential that are confidential? Can people make themselves vulnerable with you or are they afraid of being victimised?

- Capability Trust – What strengths are you using to add value to your friendship? Do they trust in your capability? How much of your intellectual capital are your friends tapping into? Some of the biggest relational assets that God blesses us with are our friends but we only relate with them superficially. Your friends can be your best business advisors. We see this in the church, that’s why I love connecting people in the church. Jesus knew that His friends were capable.

  John 14:12

  Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

It is not great to feel like you trust your friend but they don’t trust you.

8. Mutual Respect

Romans 12:10

Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves.
This also includes mutual positive regard. Look at how Paul would speak about Timothy and Epaphras.

**Phil 2:19 – 20**

19 “I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. 20 For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.”

**Col 1:7 – 8**

7 You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant,[a] who is a faithful minister of Christ on our[iv] behalf, 8 and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

**Col 4:12 – 13**

12 Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. 13 I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Do your friends have attributes that you admire and emulate?
What does respect look like for you and for them? E.g. in a team setting people of ten have the same espoused value but different assumptions about what these values mean.

**Phil 2:3**

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,*

When friendships lack mutual respect and positive regards that’s where we see bullying and abuse. The sad thing is that a lot of people use the very people they call friends.

What things do you do that are dishonouring to your friends? What things do they do that are dishonouring to you?

9. **Candour**

**Prov 27:5-6**

5 Better is open rebuke than hidden love. 6 Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

A true friend will be candid with you. In true friendship there is unfiltered conflict around ideas. You can disagree on matters without taking it personally. They can be direct with you, but you know it comes from a good place.

- How candid can you be with your friends? If not, why?
- Are you completely free with your friends?
- Of what are you afraid? (For a number of people its rejection or doing something that permanently alters a relationship. Often they catastrophize the situation.)
- How much self-censoring is there when you speak to your friends? In other words, do you keep second guessing yourself and triple checking what you are going to say?

“Good friends don’t let you do stupid things.....alone”

“A true friend can see beyond your mask even when you are fooling everyone else”

10. **Intercession**

**Job 16:20 – 21**

20 My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God; 21 on behalf of a man he pleads with God as one pleads for a friend.

We stand in the gap for our friends, before God and before man. We plead on their behalf.
Do you pray for your friends regularly?
Do you mediate on their behalf in certain matters or do you sit on the fence?
If you work on these qualities you will become a better friend to your current friends. If you are conscious of these qualities you will make better choices when it comes to selecting friends. You will know what to look for.