

Jesus, Friend of Sinners

John 15:1-17

Preached by Rev. Keith Davis, 2/10/08 (Communion Service)

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, I want to begin by asking each of you to reflect on this question: *who are your friends?* Boys and girls, who are *your* friends? *Can you name them?* Now understand, by *friends*, we're not talking about all our casual acquaintances.

Most of us here probably have scores, if not hundreds of people we know on a 'casual' basis-- people we know from work or school or college; people we're acquainted with at the fitness center, or people we know who live down our block or in our same condominium.

These are the same people we run into at the grocery store and say *hello to*; yes, we're on good terms with them, we're friendly to them, but that's not the same thing as calling them 'friend.' I think we agree that *friendship* is something deeper, something more than a *casual* relationship.

A friendship is a relationship that's built over time; it is relationship founded upon trust and loyalty; it is a relationship characterized by the mutual outpouring of love and self-sacrifice; encouragement, openness, and sharing. It is a relationship that stands the test of time; that overcomes trials and hardships and obstacles.

It's worth noting that the Word of God commands us to love everyone; but we also understand that we don't necessarily *like* everyone we're called to love. For example, God's Word even commands us to love our enemies; but our enemy is certainly not our friend.

So the real question may be, who is it that you not only *love*, but also *like*? Those are your *real friends*. For some, that list of friends may be longer than others, but realize this: when Jesus declares that the disciples are his friends, and that by extension **WE** are his friends, he is saying something that is truly astonishing, something that is truly amazing.

In making this declaration, Jesus is revealing the amazing grace of God; He is revealing the Good News of salvation for us and for all who believe. Here, *Jesus declares that He is the Friend of Sinners.*

- 1) **The Unequal Nature of this Relationship;**
- 2) **The Unending Fruit from this Relationship**

1) The Unequal Nature of this Relationship

First of all, I want to draw your attention to the Unequal Nature of this Relationship. By that, I mean very simply that Jesus and the disciples were not equals in this relationship, in this friendship. In calling these disciples *friends* Jesus is engaging in an act of great accommodation and condescension.

In order to understand that, we need to take a closer look at their relationship. Now, in keeping with our description of a friendship, we know that the disciples and Jesus developed a relationship over time. At this point in his ministry, Jesus had known these men for over 3 years.

They were together constantly. They walked together, they prayed together, they ate together, they practically lived together. Besides that, Jesus had called each of these men to follow him; they each left their family, their home, their town, and even livelihood to follow Jesus.

So they had sacrificed for Jesus; they left everything to follow him. That's a mark of friendship. They were also loyal to Jesus (tried to be); they stood by his side when the Pharisees challenged his teachings, they remained with him when others left because of his difficult teachings.

The disciples had also developed a deep sense of love and commitment to Jesus. In John 14, for example, we see that the disciples are deeply troubled and disturbed (overwhelmed with sorrow and sadness) by the news that Jesus is going away, he's departing from them.

So it would seem that based upon all this evidence (their trust, their loyalty, their love, their commitment), that the disciples had demonstrated their worth as his friends. It seemed that these disciples were just as much *his valued friends* as he was their friend.

But then beloved, when we look at this relationship from Jesus' perspective we see things a bit differently. First we must consider just who this Jesus is? That's sounds like an easy question for us to answer, but remember, John spends this entire book answering that very question.

If you turn a few pages ahead to John 20: 31, John declares his purpose for writing his account of the life and times of Jesus the Messiah. He writes: *But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.*

We see that purpose from the opening verses of chapter one where John identifies Jesus as the eternal Word of God who, without ceasing to be God, took on human flesh and bone and made his dwelling among us.

Then in chapter two, Jesus takes up His work in miraculous fashion at a wedding in Cana, where He changes water into wine, signaling to all that the Son of Man has come that we might have life, and have it to the full.

Later on John show us how this same Jesus demonstrates his sovereign power over sickness by healing the son of a Capernaum official with nothing but his word; then Jesus heals an invalid by the pool of Bethesda, commanding a man to walk who had been paralyzed for 38 years.

John then shows us Christ's sovereign power over creation itself by multiplying 5 small loaves and two small fish into enough food to feed 5,000 people with leftovers to spare; and shortly after that, Jesus walks on the waves in the midst of a storm in plain view of his disciples.

Finally, John shows that Jesus Christ has sovereignty over the power of death and the grave as Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the dead, after he had been in the grave for four days.

And so it is this Jesus, this glorious Messiah, the eternal and only begotten Son of God who calls these men, these disciples his friends. That beloved is an unequal friendship, because Jesus is God, and despite all their best intentions, we know very well who these disciples are. Jesus calls them friends, but they are sinners; and by nature sinners are not friends but *enemies* of God.

Keep in mind that among this very band of disciples that Jesus calls *friends*, are those who wanted to selfishly exalt themselves above all others in his kingdom; there is one who will betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver; there is another who will deny Jesus three times before men; there's another who will vociferously doubt Jesus' resurrection; and even though they all said otherwise, they will altogether leave him, abandon him, and desert their Master in His most trying hour.

With friends like that, who needs enemies! So surely these men are not worthy of being called friends, yet that's what Jesus calls them. This serves to highlight, to underscore the inequality of this friendship; this is what it means that Jesus condescended to call these disciples friends.

Allow me to illustrate. Let's say that President Bush left the White House one afternoon and took a stroll down the streets of Washington D.C. Let's say that he found a poor homeless man sitting on the curb-side, and he invited that poor helpless beggar back to the White House, back to live with him and eat with him, and serve him as his close confidant and friend.

Now of those two individuals involved in that scenario, who is it that is lifted up and exalted? Is it not the poor beggar? And who is it that is condescending, who is lowering himself (so to speak) to accommodate the needs of this person, to invite and accept this person as a friend?

Surely it's the President. In the same way, Jesus is condescending greatly to accept these disciples as his friends. It's a friendship that's initiated and established and secured by Christ. Jesus makes that clear in this passage. *You did not choose me, but I chose you.*

That's reminiscent of what Paul writes in Roman 5:8 *God demonstrates His love for us in this: while we were yet sinners God Christ died for us.* We also think of I John 4: 10 *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

So Jesus calls us friends, even while we were yet his enemies. This's what makes Christ's declaration so amazing, so unreal, so gracious. Isaiah says our perception of Christ was not that of friend, but more like that of someone we hate. He was despised and rejected of men, he was

one from whom men hide their faces; he was despised and we esteemed him not. John 1 says, *he came to that which was his own but his own did not receive him.*

Yet despite being rejected, and despised; despite being ridiculed and scorned, despite being mocked and beaten and crucified, despite the fact that He bled and died at the hands of sinful, unrighteous men, Jesus calls sinners friend.

In James 2:23 the Bible refers to Abraham as the friend of God, and Exodus records the fact that God spoke to Moses as to a friend, but it's interesting that while God freely calls us friend, no where in the Bible does it say that man calls God *friend*.

To us, God is and always will remain almighty God—we may never drag God down to our level, but for His part, God willingly condescends to us; by His grace Has come to us in the person of His Son Jesus Christ, in Christ God gives Himself to us for the sake of our salvation, He forgives our sins, He regenerates our hearts and minds, he makes His enemies His friends.

Beloved, this grace is visibly demonstrated to us this morning through the elements of communion; here at this table, in the bread and wine, we're reminded and assured that Jesus Christ has fully covered all our sins, that He has satisfied the wrath and justice of God, removed from us our sin and guilt, so that now God may look upon us as friends.

2. The Unending Fruit from this Relationship

So that is the unequal nature of this relationship. Next, we take a brief look at the unending fruit from this relationship. You may recall that in this passage that Jesus not only calls the disciples friends, but he says something else about their relationship.

Jesus says, *I no longer call you servants* for a servant does not know his master's business. That's very true. A servant of a household is merely given orders to do this and to do that and to go here and there. No further explanation is needed. The master doesn't take the time to confide in the servant or explain to him all he has planned, or his goals, ambitions and desires.

But the master does openly confide in his friends. In this way Jesus confided in His disciples. He told them everything the Father had told Him.

In fact, Jesus even testifies to this in his high priestly prayer in John 17: 6-8 *I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me.*

Jesus told them who he was, his purpose for coming, that he came to make the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to walk, the dead to come alive again, that he was giving his life as a ransom for sinners, though he was going to the Father, he would send His Spirit, and he would never leave them nor forsake them.

So as his friends, Jesus revealed to them his will and purpose. But there's more. Because they're now friends, no longer slaves, Jesus expects more from them. Jesus expects them to bear fruit, fruit that is unending, fruit that will last; specifically, the fruit of loving obedience.

This is exactly what Jesus has been talking about since the beginning of John 15. He wants all those who've been united to him by faith, who've been grafted into him, the true vine, to bear much fruit. Branches that do not bear fruit are hewn down and thrown into the fire to be burned.

And we can see how this command to bear fruit *relates* to their new status as well. You see, a slave, while he's certainly expected to obey his master does not necessarily have to love his master in the process. A servant's obedience can be blind obedience, outward and superficial.

But a friend...a friend obeys from the heart. A friend obeys out of a sense of love, devotion and gratitude. In calling the disciples friends, in treating them as friends, Jesus is also revealing to them the one motive, the one cause and source that lies behind their obedience -- love.

They are to love God and show God's love to others. This is the fruit they are to bear; this is the fruit that will last. And that same principle applies to us as well, beloved. God calls us friends, and therefore, our obedience to Him is always to be motivated by love.

Think of it this way, God doesn't want heartless servants who mechanically or robotically (or routinely) do what he commands. God doesn't want the kind of servant, the kind of laborer who comes to work, punches his time card, does only what he has to do until quitting time, and then the minute that clock strikes five, he's standing there waiting with his card, ready to punch out.

No one wants a servant like that. That's why God elevated our status. Yes, in many ways, we're still servants, but as servants we're called his friends. So that now in our work and labor in God's kingdom, at home in our relationship with mom and dad, sisters and brothers, or husband and wife

At work in our relationship with our employer or our employees, or with our clients; at school in our relationship with our teachers, or fellow classmates, or fellow teachers, or in our attitude toward our homework, no matter what the calling or vocation might be, we work and labor, we **obey** and **fulfill** God's will for us with passion, with purpose, with conviction and desire.

Any employer worth his salt can tell the difference between a worker who's a simple wage earner and a worker who goes out and performs his task with enthusiasm and passion and purpose and fervor. One has his heart into it, the other does not.

So, what about you beloved? God calls you *friend*, but what fruit do you bear in your life? Are you a simple wage earner whose heart isn't in it, who only does what he "has to do" for the sake of God and his Kingdom? Or do you truly love God, and is it our heart's ambition and desire to do God's will and seek out His will in every area and aspect of your Christian living?

Beloved, Christ calls us friends. Christ sacrificed Himself, obeying His own Father's will for our sake so we could be called friends. All He asks for in return is our loving obedience; the devotion and dedication of our hearts. That's the least we can do for a Friend so faithful! Amen.