

## I. Why Biblical Friendship Matters in Making Disciples

Biblical disciple-making is not merely the transfer of information. It is the formation of Christlikeness through truth, love, example, encouragement, correction, and shared life. Because of that, *friendship matters* deeply in making disciples.

Friendships are one of the many types of relationships that the Lord has given us. Now, if friendships are one of the many relationships the Lord uses in forming disciples, then we need to be careful not to flatten all relationships into the same category. God has not designed every relationship to function in exactly the same way. A father is not simply a friend. A spouse is more than a friend. A neighbor is to be loved, though not every neighbor becomes a friend. A fellow church member shares fellowship with us in Christ, though not every fellow believer becomes a close companion.

So, let's define what we mean by friendship, and then I'd like to distinguish friendship from the other relationships God, in His wisdom, has given. Then we can move on to being the kind of friend God calls us to be.

Friendship is a freely chosen relationship where personal affection, growing trust, shared life, and proven faithfulness are especially concentrated. In Scripture, friendship involves **chosen closeness**, **love**, **loyalty**, **truthful care**, and **mutual delight** that is cultivated over time through shared experience, conversation, transparency, and trust.

Scripture also shows that not every close connection is true friendship. So, we have to discern the depth of relationships.

Some friends are superficial friends. And having many friends doesn't guarantee faithfulness or help when you need it.

*A man of too many friends comes to ruin, But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother (Prov. 18:24).*

Proverbs repeatedly warns against companions who corrupt character rather than build it up (Prov. 13:20; Prov. 22:24–25). The world often defines friendship by shared preference, mutual benefit, amusement, or emotional validation. The Bible shows that it consists of faithful love and truth before God.

So, a person is not your friend in the biblical sense merely because they:

- spend time with you,
- agree with you,
- entertain you,
- support your desires,
- or make you feel affirmed.

A biblical friend helps you draw near to Christ, not away from Him.

With that in mind, let's consider how friendship differs from other kinds of relationships God has given.

### **A. Friendship differs from family relationships**

Family relationships are rooted in birth, marriage, and household order. You are a son, daughter, brother, sister, husband, or wife by God's providential assignment and covenant design (Ex. 20:12; Eph. 5:22–6:4).

In contrast, friendship is not created simply by blood or duty; it is formed through chosen closeness, shared trust, proven loyalty, and ideally, a mutual delight in truth. A sibling may become a close friend, but kinship and friendship are not identical, though similar. Proverbs 17:17 actually distinguishes them: "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity."

So family is a **given relationship**, while friendship is a **cultivated relationship**.

### **B. Friendship differs from marriage**

Marriage is a one-flesh covenant between husband and wife established by God (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:4–6). It includes exclusive covenant obligations that friendship does not include. A spouse ought to be a friend in the richest sense, but a spouse is more than a friend.

Marriage includes:

- covenant exclusivity (Gen. 2:24, Matt. 19:6),
- sexual faithfulness and obedience (Ex. 20:14, Heb. 13:4, 1 Cor. 7:2-5),
- household union (Gen. 2:24, Eph. 5:28-29, 1 Pet. 3:7, Prov 31),
- and divinely ordered roles that complement one another (Gen. 2:18, Eph. 5:22-33, Col. 3:18-19).

Friendship includes love and loyalty, but not the one-flesh covenant or marital obligations.

So, friendship may be part of marriage, but marriage is not reducible to friendship.

### **C. Friendship differs from a neighborly relationship**

Jesus commands, "You shall love (agapao) your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). Neighborly love is universal in scope and requires us to actively prefer to love those who are not close to us. Jesus extends this even to our enemies (Matt. 5:44).

Friendship is narrower and more particular. You must love all your neighbors, but you are not equally close, mutually trusting, or sharing life with all of them. We love all, are friendly towards all, but friendship is cultivated with some.

**D. Friendship differs from fellowship in the church**

All believers share fellowship in Christ as members of one body (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 12:12–27; 1 John 1:3). That fellowship is objective and spiritual before it becomes personally close. Even if we aren't close friends here, 1 John 1:3 says, "Our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ."

Friendship may grow inside that fellowship, but not every church member will become a close friend. Fellowship is grounded in union with Christ; friendship is a more particular expression of love within that broader spiritual family.

So, church fellowship is broader; friendship is more personal and selective, though it should remain holy and impartial in spirit.

**E. Friendship differs from leadership or discipleship relationships**

A pastor, elder, counselor, or discipler may care deeply for someone, but that relationship carries stewardship, responsibility, and sometimes authority that friendship alone does not define (1 Thess. 2:7–12; Heb. 13:17; 2 Tim. 2:2).

These relationships may include friendship, but they are not identical to friendship. In biblical leadership, the goal is not merely friendship but faithful oversight, instruction, admonition, and care.

So, friendship should be more mutual by nature, while leadership and discipleship often include differing responsibilities.

With these differences in mind, that is why friendship feels different from other relationships. It is not merely legal, biological, or institutional. It is relationally chosen, and for us who belong to Christ, it is spiritually cultivated. *A spiritually cultivated friendship is a relationship that doesn't just grow by accident or shared interests; it grows because both people are intentionally shaping it with spiritual depth, character, and purpose. This is done with the measure of faith God has given each of us (Rom. 12:3-6).*

**Table Discussion:** What are some dangers of flattening all other relationships into the category of friendship? Tell of a time a friendship helped you toward Christ or pulled you away.

Since we've defined what we mean by friendship and distinguished friendship from the other relationships God has given, I want to try to bring balance by addressing that friendships can change.

**Not Every Friendship Stays in the Same Place**

Not every friendship remains equally close in every season. Some deepen. Some weaken. Some must be guarded. Some must be grieved due to loss or sin. Some must be reordered. This is where I have personally needed help. There have been times I have felt guilty about where some of my friendships are. I have also been tempted in the past to think in all-or-nothing categories: either someone is my

close friend forever, or the friendship was not real. But that is not always how life works in a fallen world. Drew Hunt, the author of “Made for Friendship”, mentioned that friendships can be thought of in lanes or circles.

### **Concentric Circles:**

**(that share a common center point, with smaller shapes nestled inside larger ones):**

He mentions this model to describe how different relationships have varying capacities for intimacy, noting how Jesus had an inner circle (Peter, James, and John), a wider circle of the twelve disciples, and then the larger crowds.

### **Highway Lanes:**

He uses this analogy to explain that friendships are not static; people can move in and out of different levels of closeness.

- He describes the left lane as being for the closest friends.
- The middle lanes and right lanes represent varying degrees of friendship, moving toward acquaintances.
- People can swerve between these lanes over time based on seasons of life, circumstances, or time constraints.

This is helpful because someone may once have been very close and later move outward, not always because of hatred or betrayal, but because of distance, calling, season of life, capacity, responsibilities, hurt, or spiritual separation (leaving the faith). That does not mean the friendship was fake. It means friendship in this life is real, but not always static.

### **When Friendships Must Be Reordered**

Since friendships change, there are times when it is biblically wise for a friendship to move outward rather than inward (distance vs closeness).

That may happen:

- when someone persistently pulls you away from God rather than toward Him
- when anger, foolishness, gossip, deception, or worldliness repeatedly mark the relationship
- when trust has been broken and not restored
- when life responsibilities mean the same closeness can no longer be maintained
- when a person is demanding a depth of friendship that is not wise or fitting
- when reconciliation has been attempted, but the relationship remains tangled and strained

This doesn't always mean hostility. It could mean that a person no longer has the same access, influence, or nearness that they once did – and that's ok!

### **Forgiveness Is Not the Same as Restored Closeness**

When there is conflict and there is repentance, and forgiveness is extended, we don't want to confuse forgiveness with immediate trust, or grace without discernment. Forgiveness and restored closeness are not always identical. We as believers should be eager to forgive as Christ has forgiven us, and some offenses should be lovingly overlooked. Some offenses should be addressed openly and gently. Some friendships can be reconciled and strengthened. But because friendships change, there may be

peace, but not the same closeness in the friendship. In some cases, love means no longer walking in the same closeness, while still refusing bitterness and seeking the other's good before God.

So, the question is not only, "Have I forgiven?" The question is also, "What level of trust is presently righteous?"

We must really discern, with godly wisdom, when friendship should be reordered. Is closeness appropriate? Is distance appropriate? Since knowing God and being like Him is what He has called us to, we can ask of our friendship:

- Is this friendship helping me walk with Christ?
- Am I overlooking what should be confronted?
- Am I clinging to what God may be telling me to loosen?
- Am I calling something love that is actually fear, guilt, or dependency?
- Am I letting go because of wisdom, or because I refuse to do the hard work of love?

Think of a road with multiple lanes. Not every car stays beside you forever. Some merge closer for a season. Some drift farther out. Some exit entirely. Some return later. That movement does not always mean there was treachery; sometimes it simply means life changed. But if the car beside you is pulling you toward the ditch, wisdom says you do not stay locked beside it.

Or think of a tree in different seasons. Some branches remain close and alive. Some weaken. Some must be pruned. Pruning is not hatred. It is often part of preserving health.

Since we've defined what we mean by friendship, distinguished friendship from the other relationships God has given and how they change, let's look at *being the kind of friend God calls us to be*.

## **II. Being/Becoming the kind of friend God calls us to be**

Most people want good friends. Almost everyone does. Very few stop long enough to ask, "Am I being or becoming a good friend?"

That question matters because friendship has a way of revealing the heart. It exposes what we love, what we fear, what we value, what we avoid, and what we worship. Some people pursue friendship because they want acceptance. Some because they want safety. Some because they want to be admired. Some because they want to belong to the right group – cliqued up. Some because they want to use others without admitting it. It is possible to ***not be*** the kind of friend God calls us to be by pursuing selfish ambitions. This is why I've added "becoming" the kind of friend God calls us to be. Because of sin, we have pursued friendships and other relationships while prioritizing our selfish motives. We haven't always been mindful of God in friendship. But since we have redemption in Christ, and no longer live for ourselves, but for the One who died for us and was raised (2 Cor. 5:15), we can become the kind of friend God calls us to be. *Christ is our hope and turning point for broken and fallen friendships*.

So, to be the friend God has called us to be, we have to embrace that all things were made by Him, for Him, and through Him (Col. 1:16). That includes friendship. This helps us submit our role in the friendship to the Lord so that the way of Christ takes priority. We have to embrace that God has a standard for friendship in disciple-making. The standard is not just human friendliness. The standard

is **Jesus and His way is godly love**. You can't separate Christlike love from being a disciple or being a disciple maker of Jesus. He loved sacrificially. He listened compassionately. He welcomed the overlooked. He spoke truthfully. He did not flatter. He did not use people. He loved in holiness. He loved with purpose. He loved for the glory of His Father. To be the friend God calls us to be, it must include love because, as saints in God's kingdom, us keeping the Royal Law of Christ looks like love for others (James 2:8). It's our new way of life.

**Table Discussion**: How does having the mindset that friendships are from and for the Lord change your view of your current friendships? Why is it important that our love in friendship be Godly

So, if we are going to think rightly about friendship, we need to ask: what does God say makes a good friend?

The Scriptures before us show at least four qualities of godly friendship. A godly friend reflects Christ by:

- loving loyally
- listening carefully
- speaking truthfully
- showing impartial love

### **A) A Good Friend Loves Loyally, Especially in Adversity**

Ecclesiastes 4:9–10; 1 Samuel 20:14–17; John 15:12–13

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

Our friendship is not to be measured simply by good times. It is tested in adversity. Anyone can stay near when things are easy. Many will gather when life is pleasant, when there is laughter, usefulness, or gain. But adversity has a way of revealing what sort of love was really there all along. Whether a literal brother (blood or Christ) or a friend, a good friend loves loyally, regardless of circumstances. This loyal love reflects God's love for us and serves as a model for our friendships.

Ecclesiastes says, *“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!”*

That is a simple but powerful picture. A good friend is not just someone who stands beside you in celebration, but someone who stoops down when you have fallen or is present in the pain. Loyal love, especially in adversity, is a great gospel opportunity. We have all fallen in sin and were under the wrath of God, but because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ (He raised us with Him) even when we were dead in our trespasses. It is by grace you have been saved (Eph. 2:4-5).

Another great example of this is David and Jonathan. They were not merely casual friends; their souls were knit together. They took responsibility to care for each other in their friendship.

And then, of course, Jesus gives the highest standard: *“No one has greater love than this—that one lays down his life for his friends.”* That is the model. Friendship is not first about what we receive. It is about how love moves toward another person for their good, even when it is costly.

This matters because our natural tendency is selfish love. It’s easy to love when it’s convenient. We stay near as long as the friendship feels enjoyable, beneficial, or easy. But biblical love is not convenience-based. It is shaped by steadfastness.

When caring for people in relationships, one of the questions that can be asked is: Do you love this person, or do you merely love what this person does for you? That is not just a marriage question. That is a friendship question too.

Sometimes a person says, “They changed, so I stopped doing XYZ.” Sometimes, what that means is, “They stopped serving my interests.” Sometimes a person says, “I just don’t connect with them anymore.” Sometimes what that means is, “There is now some cost to being close to them.”

Scripture presses us deeper. A godly friend does not vanish when adversity comes. A good friend does not disappear when another person becomes weak, needy, embarrassing, grieving, or costly.

Think of cheap umbrellas sold near a checkout counter. They seem fine on a clear day. They even look useful. But when a real storm comes, they turn inside out, bend, or break. Some friendships are like that. They hold up in sunshine, but not in rain.

Biblical friendship is different. It is built for storms. It is not fair-weather love. It is loyal love.

### **Questions for our hearts:**

- Do I love people only when the friendship benefits me?
- Do I pull away when someone becomes difficult, needy, or burdensome?
- Am I a loyal friend, or only a convenient one?
- Who has needed my presence in adversity, and have I shown up?

### **Application**

A good Christlike friend:

- checks in when others are struggling
- is willing to bear burdens
- does not abandon people in difficulty
- follows through when someone is grieving or weak
- shows practical kindness, not merely kind words

It is a text, a visit, a prayer, a word of encouragement, a ride, a meal, a patient conversation, or just staying near.

But loyalty alone is not enough. A person may stay near and still fail to help if they do not listen well. So, the second mark is this:

**B) A Good Friend Listens Carefully and Responds with Compassion**

James says, *“Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger”* (James 1:19).

Proverbs adds, *“If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame”* (Proverbs 18:13). Together, these texts teach that listening is not a small courtesy. It is a form of wisdom, humility, and love.

Listening matters because people aren't problems to be solved quickly. They are image-bearers to be understood carefully. Listening is one of the clearest ways we communicate, “You matter. Your words matter. I care enough to slow down.”

Job's friends are an interesting case (Job 2:11). They came to show sympathy and to console him. At first, their coming was a kindness. Their presence meant something. Later, they failed in many ways. But their initial movement toward Job reminds us that a friend should draw near to suffering with compassion.

What do we listen for?

**What People talk about**

(Reasons Why People Do What They Do)

A concept taught by Dr. Nicolas Ellen

People and Circumstances are THE HEAT that exposes the heart:

1. People
2. Past
3. Parents
4. Problems/Predicaments/Pressures
5. Pain
6. Physical Problems

These are central keys of discussion in our Soul Care and most conversations. In discipleship and soul care, we listen carefully so we can try to help them discover how:

- **God** is using these things to change them.
- *Satan* is using these things to deceive them and keep them in bondage.

Our problems reveal our character deficiencies. How we choose to respond, if carnal, is the problem.

Listening is essential because the heart is often revealed gradually. A hasty person answers before hearing. A proud person assumes too quickly. An impatient person rushes to speak. A self-focused person listens only long enough to redirect the conversation back to themselves. Poor listening usually reveals something deeper than bad technique. It could be a variety of things, from pride to insecurity. Pride says, “I have already decided what this is.” Insecurity may be more concerned with what the other person is thinking. Good listening, by contrast, is a form of dying to self. It is an act of humility.

And compassionate listening matters because a person in sorrow does not always first need correction, analysis, or a speech. Sometimes they first need someone who is willing to hear, sit, clarify, and care.

Imagine going to a doctor and barely finishing your first sentence before he interrupts, writes a prescription, and sends you out. You would not call that wisdom. You would call it carelessness.

Yet that is how many conversations work. Someone begins to share sorrow, confusion, or struggle, and the other person interrupts with advice, comparison, a joke, or a story about themselves. That is not listening. That is talking near someone without truly hearing them.

Or think of a radio station full of static. The signal may be there, but the interference makes it hard to hear. Pride is like static in relationships. When the heart is full of self, it cannot receive others clearly.

A simple pattern can help:  
Listen. Clarify. Care. Respond.

Listen fully.

Clarify gently. (restate what you've heard)

Care sincerely. (Love without hypocrisy-Rom. 12:9)

Respond wisely. (How can I best love God and this person? Matt 22:37-40)

### **Questions for our hearts:**

- Do I interrupt people?
- Do I assume I know what they mean before they finish?
- Am I quick to offer advice void of Christ and slow to understand?
- Do I listen to serve, or do I listen only long enough to speak?

### **Application**

A good Christlike friend:

- is quick to hear
- asks follow-up questions
- avoids interrupting
- seeks understanding before speaking
- draws near to sorrow with patience
- responds gently rather than rashly

But friendship is not only about listening sympathetically. Some people listen warmly and yet never speak truth when it is needed. Scripture pushes us further.

### **C) A Good Friend Speaks Truth Faithfully, Not Flatteringly**

Proverbs 27:5–6, 9; Proverbs 27:17; Proverbs 29:5; Proverbs 11:13; Proverbs 17:9

*“Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend.”*

*“Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel.”*

*“As iron sharpens iron, so a person sharpens his friend.”*

These verses teach that biblical friendship is not mere niceness. It is honest love. It is courageous love. It is restorative love. A flattering person says pleasant things to gain favor. A faithful friend says true things to do good. Those are not the same. Flattery feels good for a moment, but it sets a trap. It comforts someone in folly. It props up pride. It hides danger. Faithful friendship is willing to wound if that wound serves healing. God calls us to be honest about what we see. That does not mean harshness, rudeness, or constant criticism. “The sweetness of a friend is counsel to the soul... (Prov 27:9).” It means a godly friend will not silently watch another person drift into sin while pretending everything is fine.

This is important in disciple-making because some people confuse love with comfort. They think love means never saying hard things. They think kindness means silence. They think peace means avoiding difficult conversations. But open rebuke can be better than hidden love because hidden love never acts when action is needed.

If I watch a brother or sister walk toward destruction and I say nothing because I want to preserve my comfort, that is *not* love. That is selfishness wearing a smile. At the same time, faithful truth is not reckless bluntness. It is not venting irritation. It is not using “I’m just being honest” as a cover for pride or cruelty. Faithful wounds are careful and measured. They are loving. They are purposeful. They are aimed at building up (Eph. 4:15-29). Proverbs 11:13 also adds that the trustworthy person conceals a matter, while the gossip reveals secrets. That means friendship involves both honest speech and guarded speech. A good friend knows when to speak truth to you and when not to expose you to others.

Think of a surgeon. When he cuts, he is not trying to harm the patient. He is removing what is deadly. The pain serves healing. Now compare that to a flatterer, who is like a person handing candy to a diabetic while smiling warmly. Pleasant words are not always loving words. Sometimes what feels sweet is actually dangerous. Or think of iron sharpening iron. That is not a soft image. Friction is involved. Contact is involved. Sparks may even be involved. But the purpose is usefulness. A dull blade becomes sharper through contact. Likewise, a good friend faithfully speaks the truth in love, to help shape a person toward godly wisdom and holiness.

### **Questions for our hearts:**

- Am I willing to speak truth when it’s needed?
- Do I avoid hard conversations because I fear man?
- Do I flatter people to manipulate or gain approval?
- Do I use honesty as an excuse for harshness?
- Can others trust me not to gossip about what they share?

### **Application**

A good Christlike friend:

- tells the truth in love

- warns when someone is going the wrong way
- does not flatter
- keeps confidences
- does not repeat offenses to divide friends
- aims at restoration, not humiliation

Remember, the friend who always agrees with you is not necessarily the friend who loves you best. Sometimes the most loving person in your life is the one willing to say, “That’s not wise,” or, “I think you’re wrong,” or, “What does God say about that?”

#### **D) A Good Friend Shows Impartial Love, Not Prejudice, Favoritism, or Self-Interest**

James commands believers to show no partiality as they hold the faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (James 2:1–9). That means we are not to treat people as more or less worthy based on outward appearance, status, usefulness, wealth, popularity, or social advantage. Partiality is not just a bad social habit. It is a heart problem. It reveals what we truly value.

Proverbs notes that the rich often have many friends, while the poor are neglected (Proverbs 14:20; see also Proverbs 19:4, 6–70).

Jesus, in Luke 14:12 warns against inviting only those who can repay you. *“He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid.”*

Romans 12:10 tells us to be devoted to one another in love and to outdo one another in showing honor.

Put together, these texts expose a very common form of relational sin: using people according to what they offer us.

This matters because the heart naturally looks for advantage. We are tempted to be drawn toward those who value us, who elevate us and to ignore those who cost us. Sometimes that takes the form of prejudice. Sometimes favoritism. Sometimes popularity-chasing. Sometimes economic or political partiality. Sometimes simple selfishness.

A person may never say it out loud, but the heart may think:

- This person helps my image.
- This person is awkward, so I don’t want to be associated with them.
- This person is influential, so I want their approval.
- This person can’t do anything for me, so I won’t invest in them.

That is *not* the mind of Christ. Christ moved toward the overlooked. He was called a friend of sinners. He did not arrange His relationships according to worldly advantage. I know I have talked about “chosen closeness”, and “being closer to some and not others”, but I want us to understand here that we are to be friendly to all!

**A note to RBC**

This is especially important to our local church. The answer to “cliquishness” is not pretending that close friendships do not exist. They will. The answer is making sure those circles are not proud, sealed, or impenetrable. Healthy church friendships are overlapping networks of relationships rather than isolated bubbles (think Drew Hunter’s Concentric Circles). Christians should go deep with a few, but they should also maintain openheartedness toward others. That means welcoming people in, noticing the lonely, and making room rather than closing ranks.

We are not to treat friendships like climbing equipment, attaching ourselves to people who can pull us upward socially, but ignore those who seem to offer no advantage. That may look strategic in the world, but it’s ugly and it’s sin in the kingdom of God.

**Questions for our hearts:**

- Do I treat some people as more valuable because of status, appearance, or usefulness?
- Do I ignore or avoid those who seem socially costly?
- Do I pursue people for what they can do for me?
- Is my love impartial, or is it self-serving?

**Application**

A good Christlike friend:

- honors people regardless of status
- welcomes the overlooked
- resists prejudice and favoritism
- does not use people for gain
- shows kindness to those who cannot repay it
- treats others as image-bearers, not social tools

So, the final question is not merely, “Do I have good friends?” The deeper question is, “Am I becoming, by the grace of Christ, the kind of friend God calls me to be?”

A good friend reflects Christ by:

- loving loyally
- listening carefully
- speaking truthfully
- showing impartial love

May the Lord make us that kind of people.

**IV. Small Group Discussion Questions**

1. Why should we be careful not to flatten all relationships into the same category?
2. How has God used friendship to expose and shape your heart?
3. Why is it good news that Christ is our hope and turning point for broken and fallen friendships?

**V. Homework**

1. Carve out time this week to read and meditate on the following verses. Write one sentence for each verse explaining how it should shape your friendships. Make time to discuss (preferably with someone from class), what you've written.

Proverbs 17:17

James 1:19

Proverbs 27:6

Proverbs 13:20

James 2:1

John 15:12–15

2. Choose one concrete act this week:

- check on someone in adversity
- listen without interrupting in one meaningful conversation
- speak a loving but truthful word where needed
- step back from a corrupting influence
- show kindness to someone usually overlooked
- welcome someone into an existing circle

3. Prayer

- Lord, forgive the selfishness in my friendships, make me more like Christ in how I love others, and give me wisdom to hold, reorder, or release friendships in a way that honors You.