

Beware of Friendship Idealism

The words came through an email. As I skimmed through, I assumed I hadn't read them correctly. My heart began beating quickly as I reread the first few lines and realized, in fact, I had read it right the first time. The biting words sunk in deep. A friend had misunderstood me and not given me the benefit of the doubt, and she was writing to let me know I'd disappointed her.

Whether it's an inconsiderate word or an unexpected betrayal, we've all been hurt by someone we considered a friend. When it happens to me, as it did through that email, my natural tendency is to pull away, erect protective barriers around my vulnerability, and let the friendship fade into the background as if it never existed.

Sometimes, when the wound is especially deep, our tendency isn't just to write off the friend off but to write off friendship itself. We're hurt so badly that we give ourselves over to cynicism, bitterness, and resentment. We wonder if friendship is worth the risk of wading through the emotions and hurts, of attempting reconciliation, of making ourselves vulnerable again.

Sure, we're friendly and sociable at a safe distance, but heart-level friendship? It's too hard and too risky, and it never quite lives up to our wish-dreams. With idealized expectations, it's far too easy to feel insecure about or frustrated with reality.

I tend to want to cast the blame for my imperfect friendships on others, but it works both ways. Sometimes I'm the one who hurts others, something I inadvertently did this year. Although my hurt friend brought it to my attention, I initially remained blind to the way I was wounding her, wanting to blame her instead.

But she brought it to my attention again, just as clearly and gently as the first time, and I finally understood the problem I had caused. This friend challenged me to stay in the friendship and work

through our differences rather than keep my distance. This felt risky to me; in the end, though, it's been worth it. What's more, it honors the Lord.

True Biblical Friendship

Isn't this what true, biblical friendship is about: being willing to love, forgive, and bear with those we don't always understand? And being willing to confess sin, inadvertent or not, and receive the grace that helps us grow? This is certainly more characteristic of biblical friendship than the dinner parties and game nights we imagine in our minds. Biblical friendship helps us grow; it sharpens us just as we're used by God to sharpen others.

Over coffee, a young woman in my church and I discussed these things together, about how we have this stubborn belief that friendship can actually be what we idealize in our heads. She said she wished people would invite her to more things and explained how it seemed everyone was always getting together without her. I admitted that I sometimes envy certain relationships and resent that I'm not included in them. After confessing our self-focused thoughts to one another, the conversation turned to what true friendship is and how it looks in reality.

Isn't it, we said, an ongoing effort? Doesn't it require commitment and perseverance? Isn't it having to deal biblically with our inevitable hurts, being quick to forgive, crossing life-stage boundaries, and refusing to put others in categories? Isn't it pushing through discomfort and refusing to give up on people, even when they disappoint us? And perhaps the most important question: isn't it the greater blessing to *be* a person that seeks this type of community, rather than clinging to false ideals and waiting for it to just "happen" to us?

While it *is* a greater blessing, friendship remains a risky endeavor.

- We must look to serve rather than be served, which means it's possible that we might not be served in the ways we hope.
- We must be ever willing to broaden the circle, which means we must have an eye for the outsider rather than an eye for how we can be insiders, and it's possible we might be forgotten in the process.
- We must be willing to address sin and conflict in appropriate ways, which means it's possible we might be rejected.

- We must be willing to be vulnerable, which means we might be misunderstood, and grace might not be extended to us.

New Definition

Instead of holding fast to our ideals, we need to cling to a new definition of friendship, one that allows for awkwardness and risk and fumbling through, because isn't the road to true friendship paved by these very things? Paul offers a definition of friendship far better than our false ideals:

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things, put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. ([Col. 3:12–15](#))

Paul certainly goes beyond vacationing together and small talk and waiting for someone else to initiate. He exhorts us to actively pursue being a godly friend to others—that is, to actively pursue being patient, forgiving, loving, and thankful for others as we relate to them. The focus is on what we must give to others, not what they might give to us. We don't do these things because we hope to get something in return—friendship or whatever else. We do these things because that is how Christ showed his love toward us, and biblical friendship will always model itself after him.

Until heaven, our community will never be perfect. Not even close. It's inevitable that we will experience hurt and disappointment in our relationships. *But it's worth the risk.* By actively pursuing others in the way Christ pursues us, we extend an invitation for the friendship we desire. But we also discover the beautiful and always-faithful way Christ relates to us. Because we have a sure and steadfast anchor, because we recognize friendship as a gift, we're willing to embrace the reality of friendship—mess and all.

