

## Spiritual Friendship

Jonathan K. Dodson | Gal 4:8-20 | November 3, 2019

A recent study announced only half of Americans have meaningful in-person interactions, *like an extended conversation with a friend*. Just 20% spend time with their neighbors, a third don't even know them. People are dying for friendship. The strongest friendships are bound together by some outside force, soul mates. This passage shows us that deep friendship requires knowing one another, ourselves, and God.

### Knowing One Another

What makes for a good friendship? Several hundred years before Paul visited the Galatians, Aristotle wrote about friendship. He describes friendship as having two distinct qualities. *First*, a giving and receiving of friendly affection. The *second* quality is mutual concern to seek another's good. You don't just feel for them; you seek what's best for them. It's why you can pick up where you left off with certain people. I think of Jesse. We met in college, lived in Santa Cruz on mission together, then Minneapolis. We have history. We often laugh about a life-threatening haircut I got in Santa Cruz, reflect on running together. But there's more to it. We recently talked for an hour and I walked away with a skip in my step. Why? We were free with compliments *and* challenges: *How are your kids? Where are you struggling as a father? Man, I'm proud of what you've accomplished. Friendship isn't just clicking socially; it's deep, mutual concern that's free with compliments and challenges.* Women tend to focus on the compliments; men on the concerns, but we need both. It builds trust. I accept you, admire you, but I don't blow smoke. How does **Paul's friendship** with the Galatians compare? Well, he clearly has affection for them; he refers to them as: brothers, sisters, children. There's mutual concern for one another's good, "though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God" (14). Paul risked his life for their good—his condition likely the result of a stoning at Lystra where he was so messed up he was left for dead—and the Galatians welcomed him despite his sorry state. Even though his presence was taxing, they didn't bat an eye. Mutual concern and affection. All sounds pretty good, but Aristotle goes on to say the *perfect friendship* is the friendship *between two people who are alike in virtue*. They uphold *the good* together. People who lack virtue may be friends, but can't have mature friendship:

Bonnie and Clyde, Al Capone and Frank Nitti, Ricky Bobby and Cal from Talladega Nights. Why? Their approach to friendship is sheer pleasure (robbing banks, goofing off) or utility (get rich, win nascar). Deep friendship is difficult for modern people. Why? We've reduced it to utility and pleasure. Friends are for good times, someone to watch movies with, for SM likes or a person to work out with, vent to, but not for virtue and goodness. We settle for friends who like us as we are but don't challenge us to what we could become. And here's where Paul parts with modern friendship. He insists on the thing they lack—a shared *standard* of virtue. Full of affection and concern, Paul drags the standard back into his friendship with the Galatians, [For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?](#) (15–16). What's the standard? The truth. The Galatians are not walking in line with the gospel of truth. In fact, their identity has so shifted to their moral performance they can't admit an intrusion by Paul or the gospel. Why? Because gospel truth threatens their preference. I think of the woman who built a secret identity through an affair but when her friend challenged her she walked away from the friendship. Or the guy whose friend confronts him on porn stops showing up to fight club. The truth is seen as an intrusion on preference. The more we express ourselves apart from the truth of the gospel, the more hollow and shell-like we become. Here's a friend the Galatians would have given their own eyes for *reduced* to enemy. That's what happens when we build friendship on pleasure and utility. Friends can quickly become enemies.

### **Knowing Ourselves**

When we possess a shared commitment to the good, a standard that can judge and guide us, there's huge potential for friendship. That's what Paul is banking on when he says, [Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?](#) He appeals to their shared knowledge of the good, of God and God of them, to draw them back into his grace. You know better *and* God knows you—you're not acting like your true self. You're acting as if you don't know God. There are two types of knowledge here. Knowledge apart from God and knowledge of God. Knowledge

apart from God, he says, is *enslaving*. Enslaved to what? To things that are by nature not gods. What's that? Idols, which is ironic because he's addressing Gentile Christians who walked away from worshipping physical idols and Greek gods. What are they worshipping now? Metaphorical idols. They're beholden to the idea that they can keep the law, perform morally, adhere to the Jewish calendar (days, months, years), and measure up. But really it's about them—their performance. Paul says, you've gone back to your old idols. You're a son but you're acting like a slave. What old gods are banging around in your heart? What thing are you so eager to protect, you'd be willing to call a friend an enemy? I have a friend who loves to compete. He was a successful college athlete, but once he graduated he no longer had a sport to compete in. So he threw himself into work. He'd work late and turn in early. His wife began to complain that he wasn't emotionally available. What old idol resurfaced? Performance. Since he couldn't prove himself on the field, he decided to prove himself at work. Even if it made his wife the bad guy. Martin Luther says idol is: "[whatever your heart clings to and relies upon, that is your God](#)." What can't you live without, what do you cling to, hide, can't let go of, your precious? Do you have a friend who knows, who calls you out into the light? Who do you need to tell? Deep friends challenge us. They're not there just for utility and pleasure, but for shared goodness, virtue. They speak gospel truth to one another. Notice Paul doesn't babysit their idols, Yeah you should probably do something about that. Is that because of how you were raised? No, he challenges them to take ownership. He's direct and clear, [how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world](#)? How can you turn back? It's the same word for repent, except it's a *sinister* direction, turning to the weak and worthless things. He shames the idols. The word worthless means beggarly. Your idol is broke. That porn never satisfies, that bank account is never big enough, one more dress! Idols never pay. They're broke. Our idolatry isn't because of how we were raised. Paul says, "[you desire to be enslaved again](#)." We perform for praise, and get angry to control *because we want to*. Sinister repentance is driven by sinful desire. A desire enslaved to things that are not by nature gods. Get real with a friend, be honest, pursue virtue, speak truth.

## Knowing God

How do we do this? Three things: return, reflect, renew. 1) By **returning** to the true God, heeding our friends. How do we do that? *Authentic* repentance. Turning your back on the idol, looking Christ in the face and saying, I have desired to be enslaved, I have loved power, control, security, lust—weak and worthless things—more than you. Forgive me and help me cling to you, my one, true *good*. 2) **Reflect** Return not just to a standard but to the Savior, not merely to character but to Christ. This is why Paul says *my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you* (19). There's a friend, willing to do what's painful for *Christ in you*. The word formed is *morphe*. God wants us to morph into Christ, *reflect Christ*. I think of that Xmen character, Mystique, who changes instantly. That's *not* how it works. Instead, it's like a potter who sits at a wheel for a long period of time, adding water, using tools, shaping the vessel. We don't morph overnight but over a lifetime, *but* we have to keep our eye on the true image we want to become. There are a few men in my life I've watched so closely I've become like them. I've absorbed bits of their character by reflecting Christ. Be friends of similar virtue. Watch Jesus so closely you morph into his likeness. 3) Ask for **renewed desire**. Perplexed Paul says, *What then has become of your blessedness?* He's referring to the blessing that came through Abraham, *so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith* (3:14). This blessing of the promised Spirit, who renews our desires for Christ. That's why the Father sends him into *the heart*. Aristotle didn't have this. Ask the Spirit each day to renew your desire for Jesus. Morning, noon, and night. Before an important meeting, on the way home from work, when your wife returns from the retreat, pause and ask the Spirit for desire to reflect Christ. The *Father* sent the *Spirit* of his *Son* into our hearts to renew our desires, satisfy our souls, morph us into the image of Christ. *He is for us* not against us. He is our great Friend, our true Companion, eager to stir up spiritual friendship. Cling to him.