

# Friendship

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, believe it or not, this is the second last sermon in our current series, Inside Out. I hope you've enjoyed it so far. And of course, the aim of this series is not to say everything we can say about what it means to be human, but just to give us a primer in some of these things.

Once again, there should be a sermon outline. It's available on our website, and that could help you to follow along. And of course, there'll be PowerPoints that will be on the screen.

There'll be a lot of Proverbs today, so look out for those when they flash on the screen. But let's pray now, and let's ask God to do a work in us as we listen to this word.

Father, we come to you today, and we just pray now that you help us to concentrate, help us to focus, and help us to pay close attention to what you have to say to us today. Would you help me, Lord, to preach with clarity, help me to preach with faithfulness, and help me to preach in a way, Lord, that honors you, and that your Holy Spirit would be taking these words and implanting them into us, and helping us to relate better to those around us.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Have you ever had this experience? You're in a canteen or cafeteria, and you've just collected your food, and now your eyes are scanning the tables for a place to sit.

[ 1 : 3 1 ] And your heart sinks as you look from one table to another, because none of your friends are on any of them. I have. It's painful. Without a doubt, being a place with no friends is one of the worst feelings in the world.

The writer Olivia Leng says that being lonely is like being hungry when everyone around you is readying for a feast. It's no surprise then to discover that prolonged loneliness is as bad for your health as smoking.

Studies have shown that lab rats isolated from one another are more likely to become addicted to mind-numbing drugs, and we haven't even talked about the mental health aspect yet. So friendship is significant.

But you don't really need me to tell you that. I think we all instinctively know it in these times, especially of lockdowns and social distancing. And yet it's a subject that's probably neglected somewhat in the church today.

We talk about family and marriage, but not so much about friendship. And yet, when we survey church history, we discover that traditionally, friendship held a high place amongst Christians.

[ 2 : 4 0 ] Take the words of J.C. Rao, the 19th century English bishop, for instance. This world is full of sorrow because it is full of sin. It is a dark place.

It is a lonely place. It is a disappointing place. The brightest sunbeam in it is a friend. Friendship halves our troubles and doubles our joys.

I'll go back over a thousand years earlier to the great African theologian Augustine, who preached. Two things are essential in this world. Life and friendship. Both must be prized highly and not undervalued.

None Christians know the value of friendship too. The ancient Greeks devoted a lot of time to the subject. A Japanese saying goes, No road is too long in the company of a friend.

And so whether Christian or not, we all know it. Friendship is a gift. It's necessary. It's significant. And as Christians, we have a unique vantage point when reflecting on the significance of friendship.

[ 3 : 43 ] You see, you might be wondering why today we're tackling the subject of friendship in this series, which is all about what it means to be human. And here's a short answer. Because that's what we're created for.

To be human is to need friends and to be a friend. You see, friendship starts with who God is.

Christians affirm that there is only one true God. There aren't two gods or three gods. And although it's been sometimes said that one is the most lonely number in the universe, that's not true of God.

For right at the beginning, before there was anything, this is what John 1 verse 1 tells us. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

And so here is a great mystery. Right at the beginning, there is God. But God is also with God.

[ 4 : 48 ] And so to say God is with God is to say that there is some sort of relating going on. As the story of our world begins, we do not find the author alone at his desk.

We discover the author already in relationship. And what kind of relationship is it? Well, as we keep reading John's Gospel, we discover the name of God.

He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And in John 17 verse 24, we're given an astonishing glimpse into how God is with God.

Right before he is arrested, Jesus prays, Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am and to see my glory.

The glory you have given me because you love me before the creation of this world. Did you catch the end of that sentence? Before we existed, God was with God loving one another.

[ 5 : 56 ] And so we discover that at the heart of the triune God himself lies an unbroken communion of love. Or put another way, there is an eternal embrace of friendship.

That's the kind of relationship that has been present from eternity. As Augustine says, God is love, but it is not inappropriate to say too that God is friendship.

That's who God is. And as we've been saying again and again throughout this series, we reflect him. We're made in his image. And so we're made for relationship.

We're made for friendship. In Genesis 2 verse 18, God says, It is not good for man to be alone. And so we often take that to mean that it is not good for man to be unmarried.

Now, marriage is good, don't get me wrong. And yet, that is not what the text says. It is not good for him to be alone, not because he needs a wife, but quite simply, because he needs others.

[ 7 : 05 ] He's made for friends. And so it's no wonder that when we study the Bible's overall picture, what is especially striking is that the Bible consistently zooms in on friendship rather than marriage as the place where love and warmth and relational satisfaction is to be found.

Song of Songs being the only exception, I think. Now, take the famous love passage of 1 Corinthians 13, for example. It's often read at weddings, but in the wider context, it isn't actually to do with marriage at all, but with the kind of love that ought to be found amongst brothers and sisters in Christ.

Or take 1 John 4, verse 7 to 21, part of which we read this morning, which is the famous passage where we learn that God is love. And in context, the passage encourages us to love one another and talks about the power of love to drive out fear.

However, once again, the love mentioned here is not romantic love, but the love found in Christian fellowship, in Christian friendship. Or take Philemon.

Paul mentions him as someone who has refreshed the hearts of other Christians by his love. But again, this is speaking of the hand of friendship, not the hand of marriage.

[ 8 : 33 ] And so that's who God created us to be. Social and communal beings who need friendship. And that's what God saved us for.

As human beings being remade in the image of God, we are saved to be friends in a sense with God, but also to be friends with others, especially fellow believers.

We're saved into a church. Now, one of my friends, a pastor serving in New Zealand, was just reflecting on the book of Ephesians recently. And one thing he noticed is how often the language of togetherness is sprinkled throughout the book.

We are fellow citizens, 2 verse 19, joined together, 2 verse 21, built together, 2 verse 22, heirs together, members together, sharers together in the promise of Jesus, 3 verse 6, and joined and held together by Christ, 4 verse 16.

And so clearly, once again, we're not made to be isolated from one another. And at the end of time, scripture pictures our time in the new creation as, amongst other things, a wedding feast.

[ 9 : 47 ] Now, here's the thing about wedding feast. A feast needs to have people laughing together and enjoying each other's company. This is what we're made for.

This is the significance of friendship. But before we proceed any further, let's also reflect a little on the confusions of friendship.

Friendship is significant, and yet, in our modern age, friendship can be confusing, can't it? Let me just raise a number of questions we can have regarding friendship today, and I'll group them under three categories.

For one, there is the question of intentionality. I know it says intensity on your handout, but I've changed it to intentionality. And under this category comes this whole host of questions.

How intentional do we have to be with friends? Are friends those whom we just click with, with minimum effort? Or are friends those whom we invest in?

[ 10 : 52 ] If we have to expand the effort to invest in them, how much? And does the requirement of effort mean that we are actually friends? Is there a difference between just being friendly with someone and really being friends?

Then there is the question of mobility. You know, human beings have always been able to be on the move, especially in the past century. We don't have the same roots as our ancestors who could easily have lived in the same village their entire lives.

And that's why the current pandemic makes us so restless because our mobility has certainly been restricted. And not only are we especially free to move in our modern age, but we now have amazing communication tools.

So whereas previously by moving, it was more or less a permanent goodbye, but that's no longer true. But that brings with it a whole set of questions on its own.

If I move, who can I stay in touch with? Do I need to? Maybe I can just friend that person on Facebook and then leave it at that? But if so, haven't I just paradoxically made the word friend one that is about distance rather than intimacy?

[ 12 : 06 ] And that leads us into the question of proximity. Is everyone whom I'm close to, geographically speaking, a friend? If I'm working with my business partner most days, is he a friend?

And what about church? Is everyone at church to be my friend? What happens when you're the pastor? Must he be friends with everyone? Can you have proximity without community? Or conversely, community without proximity?

And so I just raise all those questions to show why it's worth being more thoughtful as followers of Jesus about the nature of friendship. And so for the rest of our time, we'll turn again to what the scriptures say about being friends.

More specifically, we'll think about the characteristics of friendship and the cultivation of friendship. And as we do so, we'll discover that we won't necessarily have black and white answers to every single question that I've just raised, but hopefully we'll have gained more wisdom.

So, the characteristics of friendship. who are this a friend? You know, it would be lovely if the Bible had a verse that nicely sums it all up.

[ 13 : 26 ] Unfortunately, it doesn't, and so we need to do a little more detective work. So I'm going to begin in what might seem like a rather strange place. I'm going to begin with James 4, verse 4 on the screen.

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

In this verse, James is warning Christians not to be unfaithful to God, but he does so using an interesting metaphor, that of friendship with the world.

And so that got me thinking, how can you be friends with the world? How does the metaphor work? And does it give us some insight into what friendship really is about?

And I do think that we can draw out some characteristics of friendship by examining how James uses this metaphor. And so here are three things I think that biblical friendship involves.

[ 14 : 34 ] the first is affinity. To be friends with someone is to align yourselves with them. It's to say to someone, I feel like I have the same outlook as you.

I feel like we share a common goal. I feel like you and I have the same passion. And of course, the world has an outlook, a goal, a passion that is opposed to God.

And that's why for James, you can't be friends with the world and friends with God at the same time. Your worldviews are fundamentally opposed. The world here, by the way, isn't referring to the physical world, but to people who ignore or reject God.

Now, similarly, in Luke 23, verse 12, we're told that Herod and Pilate had been enemies, but became friends.

Why? Because they shared a common goal, a similar outlook, which was to look out for their own interests, not Christ.

[ 15 : 43 ] And that's why they're considered friends. They have affinity. allegiance. To be friends with someone is to say that you've allied yourself with them, you're dedicated to them, you're on their side, so to speak.

And that's why James considers people who become friends with the world, and who break friendship with God, to be committing spiritual adultery. It's like they've broken their marriage vows, they are not firm in their allegiances.

And so there's a sense of loyalty inherent in friendship. One that says to each other, I'm with you. We know this instinctively, don't we?

We regard true friends as those who stick with us, thick and thin, not those who run away at the first sign of trouble. the third is affection.

To be a friend is to positively care for someone, is to set your heart upon him or her. In James 4 verse 4, to be a friend of the world is to be hostile towards God.

[ 16 : 57 ] And so the contrast seems to be in part about where your affections lie. When you're friends with someone, there's affection present.

You know, if you're friends with the world, your affections lie there. One of the Bible's most famous depictions of friendship is between David and Jonathan.

In 1 Samuel 20 verse 17, we're told Jonathan loved David like he loved himself. Clearly, there's great affection there.

And so what this tells us is that friends, as biblically conceived, are more than just acquaintances or companions. Now, there's nothing wrong with acquaintances or companions or what we might call casual friends today.

Sociologists talk about the importance of what they call weak tie relationships. Now, that's referring to people whom you're only casually acquainted with, like the guy who's always at the gym at the same time as you, or the colleague from another department whom you sometimes make small talk with when you're together in the pantry.

[ 18 : 10 ] Because God created us as relational beings, even these simple interactions can have a positive impact on our well-being. But friends, in the biblical sense, go beyond that.

Look at Proverbs 18 verse 24. And so according to this proverb, friends are not merely people you hang out with.

They are differentiated from companions. Companions have varying levels of reliability, but friends are those whom you can count on. Indeed, it's possible to establish a bond with a friend that's so deep that it runs deeper than family.

In the ancient world, and even in Asian culture today, where family is still often everything, that's really saying something. And so a friend can be like a brother.

Proverbs 17 verse 17 says, a friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity. But to go back to Proverbs 18 verse 24, a friend can also be differentiated from even a brother.

[ 19 : 32 ] He sticks closer than a brother. For here is the difference between siblings and friends. You don't get to choose your siblings, but friendships are voluntary.

A friend is someone who chooses you. A friend is someone who is like your family, even though they don't have to be. And so biblically shaped friendships seem to have these ingredients, affinity, allegiance, affection, resulting in a deep bond between two people who trust and support one another.

And so the natural question that arises for us then is this. Do we have such friends? Do we have people in our lives who stick closer than a brother or sister?

What kind of friends do you have at the moment? That might be an uncomfortable and even painful question for some of us. It might be that we long for such friends, but we have to admit that we don't really have someone like that in our lives.

In preparing for this sermon, I was forced to ask myself this, do I have such friends? Perhaps not as many as I'll like. Statistically speaking, it seems as if guys at my stage of life, married with kids, a little bit closer now to their 40s than to their 20s, find it especially difficult to find deep, meaningful friendships.

[ 21 : 13 ] friendships. Certainly when I moved back to Kuching, I realised I more or less had to start all over again friendship wise. Almost none of my friends from school days are around anymore.

And so it's an area which I find challenging. And many of you, whether you're a guy or girl, whether you're single or married, you don't find it easy either.

So what to do? Well, that brings us to our next point, the cultivation of friendships. What can we do to cultivate such friendships?

What can we do not just to find such friends, but to be a better friend? For often, those who seek friends, but are not willing to be such a friend themselves, will find themselves getting nowhere.

But it is those who long to be better friends who will in turn be more likely to find good friends. And thankfully, the scriptures give us some guidance in these matters.

[ 22 : 22 ] So let's look at four things, especially the book of Proverbs tell us. Number one, friends are carefully chosen.

Whether we like it or not, friends influence us for good or for ill, they shape us and incline us towards certain directions. And that's why the Bible asks us to choose our friends wisely.

Look at Proverbs 13, verse 20. Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm. We become like the company we keep.

But what sort of friends are we to look for? David gives us some helpful criteria in Psalm 119, 63. I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts.

Now notice, David doesn't automatically seek to establish a close bond with anyone coming off the street. No, he chooses carefully. He wants friends who fear God and who keep his commandments.

[ 23 : 33 ] He can be friendly with unbelievers, he can love church goers who haven't shown real evidence yet of knowing Christ, but he wouldn't consider them his close friends.

Was David being snobbish? No, he was simply putting wisdom into practice. He was following Proverbs 13, verse 20.

For the book of Proverbs consistently make clear that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And so if David wants to walk with the wise, he would want to walk with those who fear God.

These are the people he wants to influence his outlook. For Proverbs 13, verse 20 warns us, friendship is never neutral.

They influence you. Look at Proverbs 22, verses 24, 25, for instance. 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 and snack.

[ 24 : 43 ] And so we must be discerning. We must carefully choose our friends, not based so much on whether they completely share our hobbies and our interests, but on whether they help us grow closer to God or not.

And that means today some of us need to think not just about cultivating closer godly friendships, but also about putting more distance on some of our existing friendships.

As Paul summarizes in 1 Corinthians 15, verse 33, do not be misled, bad company corrupts good character. This is the rule, don't think you'll be the exception.

Friendship is never neutral. Friends mature you or they corrupt you. Friends should be carefully chosen. Secondly, friends are committed.

Cultivating friendship requires commitment. There are friendships, the book of Proverbs points out, which are superficial and based on unstable foundations. Proverbs 19, verse 4 says, wealth attracts many friends, but even the closest friend of a poor person deserts them.

[ 26 : 05 ] Or 19, verse 7, the poor are shunned by all their relatives. How much more do their friends avoid them? Though the poor pursue them with pleading, they are nowhere to be found.

And although we probably wouldn't want to think of ourselves as being like these friends, the truth is, it can be easy to buy into a consumer view of friendship, can't it?

It's the one relationship that we can enter and exit without much commitment or so we think. It's unlike marriage or family in that sense, you know?

Isn't that a great thing about friendships? it? But the Bible says, if you want to be a true friend, we must be committed.

As we saw earlier in Proverbs 17, verse 17, let me read that again, a friend loves at all times and a brother is born for a time of adversity. Or as Proverbs 27, 10 puts it, do not forsake your friend or a friend of your family.

[ 27 : 08 ] Friends are committed. And if friends are to be committed, that's why friends have to be carefully chosen. The two go together.

You see, as Christians, it's common to be fully egalitarian in our thinking about friendship. Oh, shouldn't everyone be our friend? But that ignores our nature as finite and limited human beings.

I don't know if you've ever heard of Dunbar's number. Dunbar's number is the number of stable relationships that you can have at any one time. Officially, the number is 150.

But Robin Dunbar, the psychologist who researched this, says that's an average. The number actually varies from individual to individual. And of that 150, you can probably have 15 or so core relationships.

But whatever the exact number, the bigger point he's making is simply this. it's simply impossible to have deep friendships with everyone you meet.

[ 28 : 19 ] Now, we can see this even in the earthly ministry of Jesus. What kind of relationships did Jesus have with people? Well, we can think of them in concentric circles.

Some of them closer and some of them further away from Jesus. They were the crowds who came to listen to his teaching and watch his miracles but who had no meaningful relationship with him.

Then there were those who received ministry from Jesus in the form of a healing touch, a word of mercy and so on, who were impacted by Jesus but whom we might not necessarily say form a lifelong earthly friendship with him.

And then there were the twelve disciples, those he knew by name who were called to be with him. But even amongst the twelve, there were three in particular who were especially close to Jesus, Peter, James and John.

And at first glance we might feel uncomfortable about that. Was Jesus showing favoritism? Was he being exclusive? The answer is no. He was simply being human.

[ 29 : 35 ] He poured his life into a field for the sake of the many. And so that should free us from the guilt of having to know everyone with equal depth.

Like Jesus, we can and should serve the people whom we know that we will never know well, especially if they have needs that we can meet.

And so we give to our mission partners, although most of us don't know them well. We volunteer to teach at a vacation Bible camp to people whom we don't really know.

We love people on the outer circle in this way. We don't forget them. But with our friends, we go even further. We meet regularly, we follow up, and we open up.

We commit. Richard Lamb is someone who has many decades of experience working with college students. And he helpfully says that there are three things we should guard against when seeking to cultivate friendships.

[ 30 : 44 ] Friendships, he says, should not be ruled by the reciprocity meter. So, the reciprocity meter says, I can't take initiative with a friend unless they take initiative with me first.

Or, they repay my previous initiative. You know, it must be proportional. But, he says, this doesn't factor in the different stages of life, the different energy levels, and the different thresholds people have.

Friendships that work lavishly by this rule will find it hard to thrive. Then, he says, there's the day of syndrome. This is when someone says, I've been working hard all week long already.

I don't want to spend effort on relationships that don't grow naturally. And so, they skip the Bible study or the home group meeting. But, he says, this is like consistently choosing junk food over healthier choices.

It might feel good in the short term, but in the long term, you will suffer relationally. And then, there's the ideal time myth. Wait till I have more time, and then I'll get in touch.

[ 31 : 55 ] And this is often the most common way friendships suffer. Not intentionally, but by neglect. There is almost never an ideal time, and you just have to power through.

Otherwise, friendships that are not maintained will wither away. By contrast, friendships are strengthened by consistent investment over time in actions that might at first glance seem relatively insignificant.

Dropping a WhatsApp message before an exam or some other important moment. Inviting someone to a meal. Helping to babysit the children for an hour or two. Praying for them.

All these are little signs of commitment. And just imagine if we did this consistently over decades. Proverbs 17 verse 22 says, A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.

And committed friends cheer your heart up like no other, keeping you going, without whom our spirits could easily be crushed.

[ 33 : 07 ] Just imagine if you had friends like this, and if others thought of you as being such a friend. Friends are committed.

Thirdly, friends are candid. Friends open up to one another. In the Old Testament, Jonathan is described as being one in spirit with David in 1 Samuel 18 verse 1.

And it's hard to see how that could happen without some measure of transparency and vulnerability. Indeed, Romans 12 verse 15 asks us to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn.

And that can only happen if we are willing to go beyond superficial interactions to know each other's joys and struggles. But how do we do that? That requires the art of listening and asking good questions.

Proverbs 20 verse 5 says, The purpose of a person's hearts are deep waters. The one who has insight draws them out. A wise and insightful friend, by asking a series of perceptive questions, can gently draw out of us water from a deep well.

[ 34 : 23 ] Sometimes they can draw out of us muddy water that we didn't realise was within us, or sparkling clear water that refreshes us. They show us our strengths and weaknesses, our praiseworthy aspects, or our sin, in ways that are ultimately good for us.

Or as Proverbs 27 verse 9 puts it, Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of a friend springs from their heartfelt advice. One of my good friends is a master at this.

He knows exactly the right kind of questions to ask me, and to ask of me. And he often helps me understand myself better than I could on my own. And so if we want to have the kind of soul-to-soul friendship that David and Jonathan obviously have, we need to be prepared to have soul-to-soul conversations.

We need to be prepared to move towards people. And key to that is humility. We need to be willing to humble ourselves and reveal to them our own flaws and be willing to love them enough to take the initiative to ask good questions.

And so perhaps have a think before the next time you meet that friend or Zoom with that friend nowadays, what do you want to talk to them about? Think about that. How do you want to encourage them?

[ 35 : 48 ] Talk about spiritually significant topics, how's their relationship with God? What are they learning recently from their E100 readings? What are their things?

Why not? Have a conversation. For the Bible says friends must be willing not just to talk about the encouraging stuff but also the hard stuff.

Look at Proverbs 27 verse 5. Better is open rebuke than hidden love. We must be prepared when appropriate to tell our friends the truth.

Friendship is not flattery. Proverbs 29 verse 5 says those who flatter their neighbors are spreading nets for their feet. And so if our friends are simply saying wonderful things about us but never pointing out our weaknesses especially when they're in a good position to see that they are actually setting us up for a fall.

A true friend is never just an echo chamber. True friends are even willing to risk losing that friendship because what you want to hear.

[ 37 : 00 ] Listen to Proverbs 27 verse 6 Wounds from a friend can be trusted but an enemy multiplies kisses. And so once again humility is key.

Are you willing to invite your friends to wound you from time to time? Can you stop yourself from immediately entering into defensive mode the moment they do? After all better to receive it from them than from your enemies.

And are you willing to do it for others when appropriate? As one writer puts it, sometimes we hold things back because we care more about what the other friend thinks about me than I care about what he needs from me.

But that would be like withholding medicine from a sick friend. So friends are candid with one another. And fourthly, friends are considerate.

We must be careful with our words. Proverbs 15 verse 28 says, Friends take time to think before they speak or ask.

[ 38 : 16 ] Sometimes we say things thoughtlessly, make sarcastic remarks, or give passive-aggressive comments without even thinking about it. And we excuse it saying, We are friends, they can take it.

And yet Proverbs 12 verse 18 reminds us that the words of the reckless pierce like swords. Or perhaps sometimes, even though unintentionally, we betray confidences with a careless slip of the tongue.

But Proverbs 20 verse 19 advises us to avoid those for whom this is a pattern. Those who are not careful with their words do not make good friends.

We are to be considerate in our actions as well. We all need to be sensitive to different situations. Proverbs 25 verse 17 says, Seldom set foot in your neighbour's house, too much of you, and they will hate you.

In other words, we must not act in ways that eventually end up being overly burdensome to our friends. Now, that's not to say that we must be unnecessarily pious.

[ 39 : 33 ] In our context, sometimes that's more the issue. Yet, as a Scottish proverb puts it, friends are lost not just by calling often, but also by calling seldom.

Friends want to help, and sometimes it can be saddening to discover that someone didn't ask for help because they were too afraid to be a burden. But according to Galatians 6 verse 2, if you let me share in carrying your burdens, you honour me because you let me honour Christ.

And so, there is a balance to be struck. So, friends are carefully chosen. Friends are committed. Friends are candid. Friends are considerate.

And as you hear that list, I'm wondering if you had the same reaction that I did. When I look at this list, I thought to myself, oh my goodness, I'm a pretty bad friend.

How am I going to preach this without being a hypocrite? And that's why the final point we make today is so crucial. Lastly, the Christ-centeredness of friendships.

[ 40 : 55 ] You see, as we look at this list, our probable response is to say, I really need to be a better friend. And that's a good response as long as it isn't our first response.

For our first response should be, I need a better friend than I deserve. And here's the good news. Jesus is that friend.

Jesus knows when we treated friendship too much like a commodity. Jesus knows when we treated friendship in a self-interested way. Jesus knows when we've hidden ourselves when we should have opened up.

And Jesus knows when we have chosen not to speak the truth in love. He knows it all. And yet, in John 15 verse 15, he says this to his disciples, you are no longer my servants.

Instead, I have called you friends. Yes, you guys are slow to learn. You're always making a mess of things.

[ 41 : 58 ] But yet, you're still my friends. And look again at the prayer of Jesus that we read at the beginning of today's sermon.

Just look at John 17 verse 24. It should be on the screen. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you love me before the creation of this world.

But this time, look at the beginning of the sentence and notice Jesus wants us to be with him. Earlier we said that Jesus was with his heavenly father.

God is with God. But now he says he wants us to be with him. Jesus is extending the hand of friendship to us even when we've proven ourselves to be pretty lousy friends.

And we know that it's not just talk because of the cross. John 15 verse 13 tells us, greater love has no one than this to lay down one's life for one's friends.

[ 43 : 16 ] And that's exactly what Jesus does. And because Jesus is this kind of friend, it also means that we can run to him when we long for friends.

Maybe we want friends that stick closer than a brother, but for whatever reason, we don't have one right now. Except we do.

His name is Jesus. He chose you. He's the one friend who will never let us down. He's absolutely committed to you. He will speak truth to you in perfect love.

And he is so close to you that it can be said that you are in him. None of our earthly friends can do that perfectly. We ourselves can't be that kind of friend to everyone, but Jesus can.

Jesus is the perfect friend. And when we know Jesus in this way, it frees us to have Christ-centered friendships. It frees us to have Hebrews 10 verse 24 to 25 kind of friendships where we consider how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds and encourage each other to keep living for Jesus.

[ 44 : 32 ] Because we know that we've been fully accepted by Christ, we can be vulnerable with one another. Too often, our Christian friendships are Christian in name only.

Our friendships are Christian in the sense that we go to the same church, but actually our friendships will look no different if we happen to meet in a gym or club or some other social setting.

They don't look any different at all from our friendships with non-Christians. Christ is not at the centre of our friendships. But as Gordon MacDonald puts it on the screen, yes, there is a certain niceness to a friendship where I can be, as they say, myself.

But what I really need are relationships in which I will be encouraged to become better than myself. Myself needs to grow a little each day.

I don't want to be the myself I was yesterday. I want to be the myself that is developing each day to be more of a Christ-like person.

[ 45 : 39 ] And so my brothers and sisters, let's resolve afresh to be truly Christ-centred in our friendships. The kind that our sister Ivy shared about before her Bible reading.

And especially so when we're facing a once-in-a-lifetime event like what we're going through right now. As Ecclesiastes 4 verse 11 to 12 puts it, if two lies down together, they will keep warm.

But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you that because you are the God of Trinity, we know that friendship is at the heart of this universe.

We thank you that you've created us to be in fellowship with you and that in Christ, you want to draw us back into friendship with you for eternity.

[ 46 : 58 ] And Father, thank you that you do not just do that in an individual sense, but you also draw us into relationships and friendships with one another.

Father, in this fallen world, we know that sometimes we find friendships difficult, we find them complicated. We know that we ourselves have often fallen short when it comes to being a good friend to others.

Father, thank you that all our failures can be laid at the foot of the cross. And yet now by your spirit, we also ask that you help us to be the kind of friend that the book of Proverbs asks us to be, help us to be people who are committed, who are candid, who are considerate.

And help us to carefully choose our friends, help us to be in the company of those who would encourage us to live for you. And help us to be the kind of company that would encourage others to live for Jesus.

For those today who are lonely, Lord, we just pray, Lord, that you would draw near to them, be present with them, help them, Lord, and support them even in times of loneliness.

[ 48 : 14 ] And we pray that you would help them to persevere and that over time, you would be able to draw them again into a circle of friendships who would similarly be supportive for them.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.