



The Bridge Church

## The Spiritual Practice of Friendship

**“No medicine is more valuable, none more efficacious, none better suited to the cure of all our temporal ills, than a friend to whom we may turn for consolation in time of trouble, and with whom we may share our happiness in time of joy.” Aelred, Spiritual Friendship**

It may surprise you, at first, to see friendship as one of our spiritual practices. In our modern society, friendship is seen as a bonus to life - like sprinkles on a cupcake - rather than an essential relationship necessary for our spiritual growth. We've over-emphasized romantic love and the nuclear family and de-emphasized the importance of spiritual friendship. But I believe that friendship is essential for our personal growth and we need to rediscover the lost art of the spiritual practice of friendship.

First, it's important to understand that friendship is separate from community. The Bible calls the church by many different metaphors - a bride, a family, a body. All of those are important to understand the notion of community. We do life together with people in our community not because of affinity or personality but simply because they are part of God's family. We may feel called to care for someone that we would never socialize with because they are a fellow member of our congregation.

But friendship is different. Friendship is a mutual relationship that is vulnerable, supportive, encouraging, accepting, sanctifying, joy-filled and reserved for only a small number of people in your whole life. Spiritual Friendship is not just having an active social life or catching up over coffee once every 6 weeks. Rather as Aelred of Rievaulx wrote in his book *Spiritual Friendship*, "...We call friends only those to whom we have no qualm about entrusting our heart and all its contents, while these friends are bound to us in turn by the same inviolable law of loyalty and trustworthiness."

### **Benefits of Friendship:**

Genuine, Christ-centered friendship is essential to our spiritual journey. Just as God said that it was not good that Adam be alone, we are not designed to do this life by ourselves. Many misread this passage and exclusively think of a husband and wife relationship - but the reality is that the support we need in our life of faith often comes from friendship. Even as I think of the ways my husband supports me, it is often because of our deep friendship that I feel supported, not just because of romance. Some of the benefits of spiritual friendship are:

#### **Encouragement and Accountability**

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 says, "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor; If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up." We need people beside us cheering us on and helping us when we fall. Our close friends are the ones with which we can share our struggles and successes.

## **Challenge and Refining**

Proverbs 27:17 says, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." When we open the door to spiritual friendship, we invite those close to us to act as mirrors. They reflect to us who we really are and help make us more and more like Christ.

## **Advice and Wisdom**

Proverbs 15:22 says, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers, they succeed." Spiritual friends who are also walking with Christ can be a great source of wisdom and advice. These friends know us really well and we can trust their advice to reflect Godly attitudes.

## **Share Life's Highs and Lows**

Romans 12:15 says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." One of the most beautiful things that happens when you share a Godly friendship is the blessing of having someone who can share in our joys and sorrows - people who bring out genuine laughter while also holding space for our grief.

## **Building friendship:**

And even though spiritual friendships should be restoring and not draining, it still requires intention to build and grow. Some ideas for how to invest into your existing friendships so they grow deeper:

### **Pray Together**

The act of praying for someone else truly brings a deeper connection than just about anything else. Being willing to honestly share your life with someone, pray together and see the Lord answer is a beautiful way to bond spiritually and deepen friendship.

### **Share Vulnerably**

Lots of people have friends who they catch up with and talk about work and life and politics. But a key part of spiritual friendship is the trust that allows you to share vulnerably how you are actually doing. It's not always easy, but I find that when you risk and share with someone that is trustworthy, you will find their response to be encouraging and bring you closer. It also helps reduce shame - shame is the thing that makes us want to hide parts of ourselves, but when we let a trustworthy friend into our inner world, it lets us know we are not alone.

## **Find Common Interests**

Community exists among people who are part of the body of Christ simply because there are other Christians. But, friendship is based on mutual respect and affinity. With spiritual friends there should be a common enjoyment of time spent together - it's not all serious! Whether it's hiking or eating or working out or watching shows, friends enjoy their time together and spend time together doing things that they both are interested in.

## **Laugh and Cry Together**

Part of sharing your life with someone means you will share life's highs and lows. Whether it's laughing really hard at something or being vulnerable enough to shed tears together, sharing our emotional life with someone increases the bond. Plus, there's a new inside joke!

## **Invite Each Other Into the Mess**

True spiritual friends invite each other into their mess. Sometimes it's a literal mess of a lived in and busy home life and other times it's in the honest struggles someone is facing. But genuine friendship is found not in perfect, curated moments but in living day to day life with one another.

As you read about friendship you may feel thankful and celebrate the people in your life that have been faithful friends to you. But, some of you may feel grief or discouragement because you struggle with friendship. Can I encourage you to look around and see who in your life may be a potential friend and practice some of the ways to build a friendship. Creating deep friendship takes time and sometimes, simply finding common interests or inside jokes is a great place to start moving towards close and meaningful friendship.