

The Features of Godly Friendship

Intro: I have been intrigued by the statement of John to Gaius in 3 Jn. 14.

... but I hope to see you shortly, and we shall speak face to face. Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends by name. (3 John 14)

If I have properly understood this statement, the reference is not to some sub-group in the church, but to all the people of God where Gaius and John were. Here in at least this one verse we are able to see something important about the disciples of the Lord. They are “friends;” and they should show to one another the features of godly friendship.

But what are these features? For an answer let’s consider a section of Scripture we’ve been reading together over the past few weeks from 1 Samuel. It is the account of David and his relationship with the son of Saul, Jonathan. You will not find in all the Scripture, except for the friendship of Christ Himself, a better model of godly friendship than between David and Jonathan. Let’s take a few moments to think about what it really means to be a friend to someone else!

Godly friendship is:

Friendship that binds two people together in a life-long commitment of love
Jonathan became David’s friend out of admiration for his virtues and his ability to relate to his victory over Goliath. It was a friendship of life-long loving commitment.

Now it came about when he had finished speaking to Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as himself. (1 Samuel 18:1)

The Hebrew word used means to be bound together or tied.

The tie that bound them was “love”.

Jonathan’s commitment was manifested in a “covenant” they made with each other.

Then Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. (1 Samuel 18:3)

So strong was this loyalty that they seemed simply to enjoy hearing the pledge to protect and help one another. Twice more in the account of these two the historian reports that David and Jonathan made a covenant with each other. They lived out the proverb of Solomon:

A friend loves at all times... (Proverbs 17:17)

I could wish that every young person used this criteria in selecting friends. Look for that person that has a spiritual character, and not just the person who may be popular.

Friendship that conquers self-ambition or self-interest

It is interesting to see the difference between Saul’s view of David and Jonathan’s view.

Saul was characterized by great ambition and selfishness. When the people celebrated David's successes as a warrior over his own, he was upset, envious, and suspicious.

Then Saul became very angry, for this saying displeased him; and he said, "They have ascribed to David ten thousands, but to me they have ascribed thousands. Now what more can he have but the kingdom?" And Saul looked at David with suspicion from that day on. (1 Samuel 18:8-9)

Saul could see the implications of David popularity for his son as well. *Then Saul's anger burned against Jonathan and he said to him, "You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you are choosing the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of your mother's nakedness? For as long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. Therefore now, send and bring him to me, for he must surely die." (1 Samuel 20:30-31)*

Clearly Saul's zeal was for his son to be the king regardless of what God wanted; but notice in contrast Jonathan's attitude:

Thus he said to him, "Do not be afraid, because the hand of Saul my father shall not find you, and you will be king over Israel and I will be next to you; and Saul my father knows that also." (1 Samuel 23:17)

Jonathan was submissive to the purposes of God and he was glad to be the friend of David even though it meant personal sacrifice and "second place". Sometimes people find it difficult to see another prosper; but this is selfish and not true friendship. A true friend will rejoice in the prosperity and exaltation of his friends without resentment or jealousy.

Friendship that pleads one's cause in the presence of an enemy

Two unfortunate and yet often applicable words in our vocabulary are "two-faced" and "back stabber". All of us have had experiences where we thought someone who was our friend was actually seeking to hurt us behind our backs. Here is where Jonathan's friendship demonstrated its sterling quality.

Even though Jonathan knew that his father did not like David and wanted him dead, he pled David's cause before his father again and again.

Now Saul told Jonathan his son and all his servants to put David to death. But Jonathan, Saul's son, greatly delighted in David. Then Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father, and said to him, "Do not let the king sin against his servant David, since he has not sinned against you, and since his deeds have been very beneficial to you. (1 Samuel 19:1,4)

Jonathan even risked his own life to do this.

But Jonathan answered Saul his father and said to him, "Why should he be put to death? What has he done? Then Saul hurled his spear at him to strike him down; so Jonathan knew that his father had decided to put David to death. (1 Samuel 20:32-33)

A real friend will not stand by and allow a good person to be maligned or abused by another. Jonathan boldly stood up for his friend even to his own father and at his own expense. But notice further:

Then Jonathan arose from the table in fierce anger, and did not eat food on the second day of the new moon, for he was grieved over David because his father had dishonored him. (1 Samuel 20:34)

Be a friend that is loyal in another person's absence. Don't allow yourself to be drawn into criticism or gossip about them.

Friendship that protects from and helps in times of adversity.

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

The real proof of friendship is not ultimately in covenants of words, but manifestation in deeds. Jonathan proved by his deeds that his friendship was real. We see this two ways:

Jonathan made efforts to protect David from danger. On one occasion when David suggested that Jonathan might not have been as forthcoming as necessary to protect him, Jonathan responded:

Far be it from you! For if I should indeed learn that evil has been decided by my father to come upon you, then would I not tell you about it? (1 Samuel 20:9)

Jonathan made efforts to encourage David in hard times.

And Jonathan, Saul's son, arose and went to David at Horesh, and encouraged him in God. (1 Samuel 23:16)

A true friend will be interested in our spiritual well-being as well as our physical well being and will seek to encourage us to do the right thing.

Application

The value of a friend is hard to measure. Though some have misrepresented the friendship of David and Jonathan as some kind of sensual attachment (some even arguing for a homosexual relationship), the truth is that it was a deep and abiding commitment based on mutual respect and admiration—the kind of love that is pure and spiritual. Upon Jonathan's death, David made this astounding statement:

I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; you have been very pleasant to me. Your love to me was more wonderful than the love of women. (2 Samuel 1:26)

The bonds of David's attachment to Jonathan and the depth of their love for each other was even greater than those he had apparently with his wives.

If you have such a friend in your life I hope that you will thank God that you have been so blessed. I think one of the saddest things in this life is to look around and say, "I can't think of a single person that I would call a true friend". If such is the case in your life, I am deeply sorry and hope that you will find a way to earn the loving respect of another because of the life you live. But it is good to remember:

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

Above all I hope that we will not forget the importance of the friendship we have in Jesus Christ! In the passage we read earlier, John seems to say that wherever God's people are there our "friends" are! In fact, the one place where we should be able to say we always have friends is among the family of God! There we should find people like Jonathan who will covenant to love us for life, to put our interests above their own, to protect us against our enemies, and come to our aid in time of need.

I count among my greatest friends my spiritual family in Christ.

Conclusion: There is one friend greater than all! It is Jesus. He said, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13).

Jesus proved He had such a love by giving His life for us and he wants to enter a life-long covenant of love with us as His friends.

But there is another verse we need to remember:

You are My friends, if you do what I command you. (John 15:14)