

I Have Called you Friends Ես Ձեզ Բարեկամ Անուանեցի

I Thessalonians 3:1-13

How do you describe a friend? What makes someone a friend?

Packing up the dreams God planted
In the fertile soil of you
Can't believe the hopes He's granted
Means a chapter in your life is through
But we'll keep you close as always
It won't even seem you've gone
'Cause our hearts in big and small ways
Will keep the love that keeps us strong

And friends are friends forever
If the Lord's the Lord of them
And a friend will not say never
'Cause the welcome will not end
Though it's hard to let you go
In the Father's hands we know
That a lifetime's not too long
To live as friends (Michael W Smith)

Friends, I miss my friends so much. Do you have friends?

Paul loves the church of Thessalonica. Paul leads, teaches, and gives himself to this church. In previous sermons, we spoke about Paul's and his disciples' commitment as leaders to this group, as well as the faithfulness of this church to in their commitment to Christ. Today I will continue to explore Paul's relationship with this church. I will start with one of my favorite verses in the Bible when Jesus said to his disciples: **"No longer do I call you servants... but I have called you friends..."** (John 15:15 ESV)

Paul learned from Jesus what it means to be a friend to someone. Please notice that my sermon is not about Facebook friendship. My sermon is not about liking, loving, not liking or not loving someone on the Internet by hitting a key.

Paul loves this church. Just read the way he describes his relationship with them:

“So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.” (1 Thessalonians 2:8 ESV)

“We endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face...” (1 Thessalonians 2:17 ESV)

“For you are our glory and joy.” (1 Thessalonians 2:20 ESV)

“you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you” (1 Thessalonians 3:6 ESV)

“as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?” (1 Thessalonians 3:10 ESV)

If this is not friendship, what kind of relationship is this? Let us examine further.

1. The Thessalonians are Paul’s Joy and Glory.

In chapter 2:17-20 Paul tells the Thessalonians that he would like to visit them and see them face-to-face, but he could not. Paul and his friends had to leave Thessalonica in a rush (Read Acts 17). Paul explains why he wanted to see them again. He cares for them, he follows up with them, he wants to answer their questions, he wants to teach them more and he wants to take care of them (as we find in chapter 3). Paul draws the picture of Jesus’ second coming. When Jesus comes back, he will crown Paul (us) with the crown of victory. For Paul, that crown of boasting and exaltation is the church of Thessalonica. That is the reason he says, “you became our joy and crown of glory.” “Your life testimonies are our joy, our pride, our crown of glory.”

It is the season of graduation. Don't you see how parents, grandparents, teachers, all are full of joy and pride when they see students achieve their goals? Paul’s joy is to see that the church that he planted grows in faith and is transformed into Christlikeness. That is his joy and glory.

It is almost summer. I can foresee how farmers will be joyful when they see their fields filled with crops and fruits.

I look back and see how God used me and my wife in serving the Lord in different fields. They are our joy and pride in Christ. You are also my joy. I pray that God will give me strength to be Christ's Servant, loving, caring, exhorting, teaching, helping you to know Christ more and more.

2. Friendship in Afflictions

"Friendship ... is born at the moment when one man says to another, "What! You too? I thought that no one but myself . . ." C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*

Paul and the disciples were in afflictions. Because of their faith in Christ, Paul and his friends were beaten, jailed, rejected, and thrown out of cities. They knew what it means to be in pain. I have seen in my life that you will know if a friend is a true friend when pain and suffering comes to your life. "A real friend is one who walks in when the rest of the world walks out."¹

In the next chapter 3:1-5, Paul says twice *that it was no more bearable*. That is why he sends Timothy to Thessalonica. Then he describes why Timothy is coming to see them.

"to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this." (1 Thessalonians 3:2-3 ESV)

Paul cares for the health of the church in Thessalonica. He wants to see if their faith will remain strong under the pressure of pain and persecution. He uses the Greek word ***stārē'zō***, translated **established**, which also means to make stable, place firmly, set fast, fix, to strengthen, make firm. The second word is ***parakaleō***, to **exhort** you, to comfort, to call to one's side, call for. Why did he use these two verbs?

In Philippi, they faced opposition; then in Thessalonica, further problems. He knows on his own skin what it means to be rejected. He identifies with their pain in two ways: in feeling with them, comforting them, exhorting them, but also strengthening them, encouraging them to stay firm and not lose heart.

We will face difficulties in life. Suffering and pain are part of our lives. We experience different kind of sufferings. Some have to do with our faith, and some are have to do with physical condition. Some are created by our own actions, and some we face without being responsible for their existence.

How do we face any kind of pain? Do we have friends who care for us? Do we care for others who are in affliction?

3. Friendship Brings Life and Joy

for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God...? (1 Thessalonians 3:7-9 ESV)

Timothy came back to Paul and brought **good news**. (It is the same word *euaggelizō* used for the Good News of the Gospel). What is the good news? **Timothy brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— (1 Thessalonians 3:6 ESV)**

Do you see the relationship of this church with Paul? Both wanted to see each other. Both are growing in faith under persecution. And both have a friendship that brings JOY and LIFE. Paul says, “After hearing your good news, **we LIVE.**”

Do you have friendships that bring life to you? Do you wait eagerly to see someone and have a dinner with, or go to a concert, or baseball?

Friendship that brings life and joy...

4. Friendship that leads us to a Holy Life

Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts

blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (1 Thessalonians 3:11-13 ESV)

Paul ends this section with a prayer, like a benediction. Paul, a genuine friend of Thessalonian church, has blessings to offer them:

1. May God direct you. May God lead you daily in your decisions
2. May God increase your love to each other and to others outside the circle of believers.
3. May God establish your hearts blameless in holiness. May God lead you for a holy life, learning daily to separate from the old to a new life, to be transformed and not conformed.

A young person's friend. Does your friend lead you away from the Lord? Does your friend expose you to more temptation?

A real friend's desire is to see his friend live a holy life. This should be the best thing one friend wishes to see in the other friend. More than success, more than a better job, more than health, a new life of holiness.

Do you have the desire that your friends live a holy life?

I will end with a story that I saw on the news.

BENTON HARBOR, Mich.-- It all went down on a block in Benton Harbor, Michigan. Back in 2005, Jameel McGee says he was minding his own business when a police officer accused him of -- and arrested him for -- dealing drugs.

"It was all made up," said McGee. Of course, a lot of accused men make that claim, but not many arresting officers agree. "I falsified the report," former Benton Harbor police officer Andrew Collins admitted.

"Basically, at the start of that day, I was going to make sure I had another drug arrest." And in the end, he put an innocent guy in jail.

"I lost everything," McGee said. "My only goal was to seek him when I got home and to hurt him."

Eventually, that crooked cop was caught, and served a year and a half for falsifying many police reports, planting drugs and stealing. Of course McGee was exonerated, but he still spent four years in prison for a crime he didn't commit.

Today both men are back in Benton Harbor, which is a small town. Maybe a little too small.

Last year, by sheer coincidence, they both ended up at faith-based employment agency Mosaic, where they now work side by side in the same café. And it was in those cramped quarters that the bad cop and the wrongfully accused had no choice but to have it out.

"I said, 'Honestly, I have no explanation, all I can do is say I'm sorry,'" Collins explained.

McGee says that was all it took. "That was pretty much what I needed to hear."

Today they're not only cordial, they're friends. Such close friends, not long ago McGee actually told Collins he loved him.

"And I just started weeping because he doesn't owe me that. I don't deserve that," Collins said.

But he didn't forgive just for his sake, even for Collins'. "For *our* sake," McGee said. "Not just us, but for *our* sake."

McGee went on to CBS News about his Christian faith, and his hope for a kinder mankind. He wants to be an example -- so now he and Collins give speeches together about the importance of forgiveness and redemption.

And clearly, if these two guys from the coffee shop can set aside their bitter grounds, what's our excuse?²

1 Walter Winchell www.brainyquote.com/quotes/topics/topic_friendship.html

2 <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/on-the-road-innocent-michigan-man-ends-up-working-alongside-crooked-cop-that-locked-him/>