

“Focus on the Friendship” (John 15:12–17)

What do you want from a church? If you’re like most people, you want dynamic preaching, awe-inspiring worship, and great ministries for children, teens, and adults. You want the whole kit and kaboodle. Yet, most Christians have a pet preference in what they want from a church. For me, it’s preaching. When I was eighteen years old, I began listening to Dr. Tony Evans preach expository sermons.¹ As a result, I fell in love with God’s Word and biblical preaching. When I have looked for a church in the past twenty years or have visited other churches, I am always interested in the caliber of the preaching. I have learned over the years, however, that many Christians don’t share my preference. They deem worship, programs, and even facilities as more important. Now, we can quibble about what area of ministry is most important, but it may very well come down to personal preferences.

Nevertheless, there is a church priority that we can all agree on: friendship. During my tenure at Emmanuel, there have been three key turning point experiences for me. First, when I came to Emmanuel, we used to bring our new members on stage and introduce them to the congregation. Whenever we would ask a new member why he or she decided to become a member, the person didn’t say, “I just love the preaching.” “The worship is amazing.” “There are great kid’s programs.” Quite the opposite, nearly every single new member would say, “I love the friendliness of this church, and I’ve made some great friends.” It began to dawn on me that friendships are incredibly important. Second, several years ago our elders were revising our *Discover Emmanuel* membership manual. We were seeking input from some of the trusted leaders in our church. The great Sean Vincent, otherwise known as “The Church Phantom” because of his behind the scenes service, weighed in on this project. He mentioned that the word “friendship” was missing from the values and convictions section of our manual. He indicated that this is one of the most important values of Emmanuel. On account of Sean’s recommendation, we added, “We value Christian friendship and accountability.” Over the past few years we have tried to live out this value. Finally, whenever I am ever tempted to prematurely leave Emmanuel, I think of the friends that my family has made and the love that we have for this body. The thought of telling certain people that we are leaving the church is honestly beyond my comprehension.

When everything is said and done, deep down, all of us value friendship and community. We can’t deny it, we can’t suppress it, and we can’t shake it. God wired all of us with a need for friendship. Jesus’ words in John 15:12–17 apply to everyone—to those who have friends and to those who feel they don’t, to the extrovert and the introvert. As we seek friendship with Jesus and one another, we can develop deeper and deeper relationships. *Friendships make the church go forward.*

In 15:12–13 Jesus says, **“This is My commandment,² that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”** There are three observations worth noting in these two verses. *First, Jesus focuses on the priority of love.* John brackets Jesus’ words at the beginning (15:12) and the end (15:17) with the command for Christians to love one another. John’s emphasis in this passage, and the whole Upper Room discourse, is love for believers (cf. 13:34–35). Therefore, I will not be discussing love for your unbelieving neighbors or coworkers. Instead, I will be emphasizing the importance of loving the family of God.³

Second, Jesus commands disciples to love one another. Jesus doesn’t issue a suggestion or a recommendation. He commands His disciples to love one another, because Christian love isn’t a feeling; it’s an act of the will. Notice Jesus doesn’t say, “This is My commandment, that you like one another.” That isn’t a choice. Let’s face it, there are some Christians you like, and there are some you don’t like. You don’t like their personalities, their preferences, or their priorities. You don’t have any chemistry. That’s okay. You still can love them even though you don’t like them because love is a choice to seek their highest good. This is an issue Jesus can command us to do, because it is a decision of the will.

This type of love goes against the grain of our society. Love, we are told, cannot be turned off and on like a water faucet. You either love someone or you don't. Yet, *agape* love *can* be turned on like a water fountain. If I am thirsty, I can leave our auditorium and walk down the hall to our water fountain, turn the handle, and drink. It's a decision of my will. Likewise, love seeks others' greatest good and God's highest glory. Today, will you practice *agape* love with those in your family and church?

When I do marital counseling, I give the couple a legal pad and pen and ask them to write down their expectations of one another. People often look at me with a smug expression that suggests, "I have an unconditional love for my spouse." Of course, in as gentle of a tone as possible, I say, "You're lying to yourself." All finite, sinful humans have expectations of others. We even have expectations of God. When God doesn't do exactly what we think He ought to do in our personal lives, we get mad at Him, or at the very least disappointed with Him. This is especially true in our relationship with others. You and I have expectations of those we love, and when they don't meet our expectations, we become frustrated. So I have couples write down all their expectations of one another, and then I say, "If your spouse fails to meet all of these expectations, will you still love him or her?" Will you exhibit *agape* love to other believers in your life (e.g., your children, your siblings, your parents, and your fellow church members)? *Friendships make the church go forward.*

Third, Jesus has demonstrated love through selfless service. In 13:1–17, Jesus selflessly washed the disciples' grimy, grungy, grotesque feet. On the one night of all nights that they should have put Jesus first, He served them in memorable fashion. Jesus' entire life consisted of putting others first. In 15:13, Jesus refers to His death—the ultimate expression of His love for the disciples.⁴ So Jesus lived and died as a selfless, sacrificial servant. He's the example that we are to follow. Interestingly, most people of character would willingly lay down their lives for their spouse or children. But honestly, this isn't too terribly impressive. Unbelievers and believers alike are willing to demonstrate this momentary act of courage and bravery. For the believer, this means immediate entrance into Jesus' presence, so there is ultimately no loss⁵ . . . he would even die as a hero, to boot! It's far more difficult to die to yourself on a daily basis for those whom you love. True sacrifice isn't just dying for a loved one, but more importantly, living for that loved one. Sacrifice is essential to genuine friendship and love.⁶

Dr. Robertson McQuilkin was, for many years, the president of Columbia Bible College and Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina. In about 1980 Dr. McQuilkin began to see signs of memory loss in his wife, Muriel. For the next decade he watched as his wife's career of conference speaking, radio shows, and television began to erode and disappear. In the mid 1980s she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and her deterioration continued to advance rapidly. This situation naturally posed a crisis for Dr. McQuilkin. As president of a thriving college and graduate school, how could he meet the needs of both his wife and his job? Many well-meaning Christian friends and colleagues encouraged him to put Muriel into an Alzheimer's unit, but McQuilkin couldn't bear the thought. As Muriel's condition worsened, he made a decision that was "a matter of integrity" (his words). He resigned from Columbia to care for his wife full time. Some people thought McQuilkin was choosing this task at remarkable social and professional cost. They felt like he was throwing away his career—one that God had provided. But McQuilkin found tremendous joy in serving his wife who had unselfishly demonstrated forty-two-years of love for him.⁷

Would you choose to care for your spouse in a case of long-term sickness? Would you be willing to sacrifice your career or your interests? Would you turn down a promotion or even quit your current job in order to spend more time with your children and grandchildren? Would you choose to say no to some of your teenage social activities in order to spend more time with your siblings and parents? Would you selflessly step out of the ministry limelight and let another brother or sister occupy your church position? When you carry out these types of selfless and sacrificial acts of love, God's program moves forward, because *friendships make the church go forward.*

Friendships are important to everyone, but they're especially important to Jesus, the creator of friendship. In 15:14 Jesus says, **"You are My friends if you do what I command you."** Jesus is speaking to His eleven disciples. In short order He will use these men to change the world (just read the book of Acts). Jesus is seeking intimate friendship with His disciples, so He gives His closest friends the condition for friendship—obedience—primarily to love other believers.⁸ This has nothing to do with the disciple's salvation; but it does have to do a lot with their sanctification (i.e., Christian health and growth). "Friend" is just another experiential term such as "abiding" or "fellowship."

Jesus is a friend to us by His grace. He has removed the enmity that separated us from God through His death on the cross for our sins. Those who place their faith in Jesus' work experience His friendship. But this does not mean that Jesus considers you a friend *to Him*. We are a friend to Jesus by living a life characterized by obedience.⁹ Although no one is perfect, as we grow in our obedience to Christ we experience different degrees of friendship. We all have different types of friends. A person can be a casual friend, a social friend, a close friend, or an intimate friend depending on his or her love and loyalty. Likewise, all believers are God's friends in one sense, but abiding believers are Jesus' friends on a deeper level because they seek to obey Him consistently (cf. Ps. 25:14).¹⁰

Jesus fleshes out this theme of friendship further in 15:15: **"No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you."** Jesus said that He no longer calls His disciples slaves, implying that He had done so in the past. One of the common titles God used for the prophets in the Old Testament was "my servants the prophets."¹¹ There is nothing wrong with the description "servant" or "slave" (*doulos*). Jesus and the New Testament writers use this term frequently of believers.¹² However, there is something intimate about the title "friend." In the Old Testament, only Abraham was called "the friend of God." Abraham was declared justified in Gen 15:6, but he was "saved" earlier.¹³ Yet, it wasn't until Gen 22 when Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac that he was called "the friend of God." Abraham had walked with God for about thirty-five years before He passed this spiritual test.¹⁴ Clearly, this was not salvation, which Abraham already had; this act of obedient faith was true friendship with God. As a result, Christians, Jews, and Muslims identify Abraham by the title "the friend of God."¹⁵

Like Abraham, we have the same privilege of friendship with Jesus *if* we yield to His will in our lives and remain occupied with Him. The result is intimacy. In former times God had not revealed His mind fully to His people.¹⁶ However with the coming of Jesus He revealed His plans, as to friends rather than as to slaves.¹⁷ A slave is expected to do what his master instructs him to do, whether or not he likes it, and whether or not he understands why he is commanded to do it. The best analogy today would be found in the armed forces. The change would be from the status of a "private" in the army to a "pal" of the sergeant. When new recruits are sent to boot camp, it is to train them to be "slaves." That is, it is to train these men to obey orders, instantly, and without question. If the sergeant orders a private to dig a hole four feet square, the private is to do it. If the sergeant then orders the private to fill the hole back in again, he is to obey without hesitation. The private is virtually the sergeant's slave. The private would never think of expecting the sergeant to explain his reasons for giving any order.¹⁸ But that same private may become a "pal" to that sergeant. They may become drinking buddies or workout partners. The sergeant may share things with his pal that he would not share with other privates.

Similarly, as we become Jesus' friends, He will disclose His plans and purposes to us. He will share His thinking, His goals, and His motivations for doing things. As a result, we will come to know His heart and mind. We will experience a greater degree of insight into the Scriptures. We will hear the voice of God more clearly. Our thoughts will become more like His thoughts. We will carry out His purposes on earth as they are in heaven. He will express His love to us in new and fresh ways. On account of our obedience nothing will block the flow of fellowship and friendship. Our intimate friendship with Christ will *make the church go forward*.

This builds up to Jesus' powerful words in 15:16: **"You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you."** In Jesus' day, a would-be disciple chose the rabbi under whom he wished to study and sought acceptance as one of his followers.¹⁹ Rabbis didn't take the initiative to choose and pursue their disciples. This would have been considered beneath men of such position. However, Jesus broke all societal norms and chose His disciples and then called them to follow Him. Clearly, the implication is that Jesus chose His disciples for salvation. So whenever you hear anyone claim, "I found God," remind such a person that God found him or her! We were all running away from God, but He ("the hound of Heaven")²⁰ chased us down and captured our hearts. As a result, we believed in Jesus for salvation. But God is never content to let us sit on our salvation; He expects us to fulfill His purposes. First, we are appointed to go and bear fruit. Jesus uses Great Commission language, "Go."²¹ In this context, to "go and bear fruit" refers to loving other Christians. As we fulfill the Great Commandment,²² the world will know that we are Christ's disciples. Evangelism will naturally and inevitably take care of itself. The result will be fruit that remains for all of eternity. The second purpose in our service is to pray for fruitfulness. Asking the Father through prayer in Jesus' name is necessary for fruit-bearing to happen. Jesus linked prayer and fruit-bearing in a cause and effect relationship. Prayer plays an essential role in the believer's fruitfulness.²³

The final verse of this section (15:17) once again hits the familiar theme of love and friendship. In case we have forgotten, Jesus says, **"This I command you, that you love one another."** Again, the command goes forth: We are to love one another. *Friendships make the church go forward.*

This past week, I was reading an article on my favorite baseball player, Albert Pujols, the first base for the St. Louis Cardinals. Pujols is arguably the greatest baseball player in the world. He is also a Christian gentleman who strives to share the gospel with every player who reaches first base. Albert has one year left on his contract and the Cardinals would like to offer him an extension. But Pujols is encouraging them to sign Matt Holiday and other free agents first! Pujols is a selfless man who puts the needs of the team first. Even though he could command all kinds of money and make himself the top priority, he wants the best for the Cardinal organization. In our day and age of athletes holding out, renegotiating contracts, wanting more and more money and more and more guarantees, Pujols is a breath of fresh air. He reminds us that sports are not about me, myself, and I . . . they are about team.²⁴

My son Joshua loves Christian heavy metal. He is caught up with all kinds of different Christian bands. I always have to remind him that these bands break up as frequently as we change our clothes because most bands are concerned about more money, more touring dates or record sales, and even a possible solo career. Most bands don't last because they are not loyal and committed to the team.

Missionaries devote their lives to fulfilling the Great Commission. Most go to Bible College and even seminary. Many have to go to language school. Nearly all have to raise their own financial support. Yet, research indicates that most missionaries who return to the States and discontinue mission work do so because they can't get along with other missionaries. Sadly, some missionaries put their own goals, personalities, and philosophies ahead of God's kingdom agenda of teamwork.

Typically, people who leave churches don't depart because of the preaching, the worship, or the programs. Instead, they leave because they don't sense the church is a team, or better yet, a family. What they want are friends. We are all responsible to take initiative and show love for one another. As we do so, we provide the greatest witness for Christianity. *Friendships make the church go forward.*

Scripture References

John 15:12–17

John 13:34–35

1 John 3:10–24

1 John 4:7–21

Romans 5:7–10

Romans 13:8–10

Matthew 12:48–50

Study Questions

1. Why does Jesus have to command me to love other believers (15:12, 17)? Why do I find it so difficult to love other Christians? When have I particularly struggled loving a particular Christian? What did I learn through this challenging relationship? Did I eventually come to the place where I was able to obey the love commandment?
2. How have I experienced Jesus' sacrificial love in my own personal life (15:12–13)? When do I struggle the most to receive Jesus' love? How can I learn to accept His unconditional love for me? How does knowing Jesus' forgiveness and grace help me to extend love to others? Read Matthew 5:43–47 and Romans 5:8–10. How does Jesus' love for His enemies challenge me to love my fellow Christians?
3. Would Jesus consider me one of His friends (15:14–15)? Why or why not? How would I rate my obedience to Jesus on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest)? What area of my life is holding me back from greater obedience? What can I do to obey Jesus in this area? Who can help me grow in my friendship with Jesus?
4. How important is fruit bearing to Jesus (15:16)? How does fruit bearing relate to my purpose in life? In what areas of my life am I especially fruitful? Where am I lacking in my fruit bearing (e.g., marriage, family, work, church)? How can I further submit this area of my life to the Lord?
5. Would those believers who know me best characterize me as a loving Christian? What would my spouse say? What would my children say? What would my siblings say? What would my parents say? How can I more effectively express my love for these individuals?

Notes

¹ You can check out Dr. Evans ministry at www.tonyevans.org.

² Jesus repeated this theme often (cf. John 13:34; 15:17; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7–8, 11–12, 19–21; 2 John 2:5).

³ In Gal 6:10 Paul writes, “So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.”

⁴ Jesus models the pattern of friendship by laying down His life. It is a rare thing for a man to die for a friend. But Christ goes beyond such an expression of sacrifice and gives His life for His enemies—even for those who crucified him (Rom 5:7–8).

⁵ See 2 Cor 5:6–8; Phil 1:21–23.

⁶ Jesus never asks Christians to do things He has not done. Jesus’ sacrificial love was also evidenced by His death on the cross. In 10:18 and 14:31 Jesus spoke of his death on the cross as a commandment he had received from his Father, which also links the idea of commandment and love as they are linked here. Cf. John 13:1: “Jesus loved them [His disciples] to the end.” This constitutes a reference to Jesus’ self-sacrificial death on the cross on their behalf; the love they are to have for one another is so great that it must include a self-sacrificial willingness to die for one another if necessary.

⁷ Gary M. Burge, *The Gospel of John*. NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 382–83. Robertson McQuilkin, “Living by Vows,” *Christianity Today* 35 (Oct. 8, 1990): 38–40. The full story is also in *A Promise Kept* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1998).

⁸ Cf. John 14:15, 23–24; 15:10; Luke 6:46. *Contra* Carson who writes, “This obedience is not what *makes* them friends; it is what *characterizes* his friends.”

⁹ Michael Eaton, *John*. Preaching Through the Bible (Kent, UK: Sovereign World Trust, 2009), 241.

¹⁰ Thomas L. Constable, “Notes on John,” 2008 ed.: www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/john.pdf, 229.

¹¹ E.g., Jer 7:25; 25:4; 29:19; et al.

¹² E.g., Luke 17:10; Rom 1:1; 2 Cor 4:5; Col 4:12; Jas 1:1; 1 Pet 2:16; and Rev 1:1.

¹³ Clearly, Abram believed in the Lord and was declared righteous when he left Ur (Heb 11:8; 11:31–32). The syntax of Gen 15:6 and the form of the word “believed” show that Abram’s faith didn’t begin after 15:1–5. Wenham states, “The verbal form (waw + perfect) ‘he believed’ probably indicates repeated or continuing action. Faith was Abram’s normal response to the Lord’s words.” Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*: WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 329. Moses probably recorded Abram’s faith here because it was foundational for making the Abrahamic covenant.

¹⁴ There was a 24-year time-gap between Genesis 12:4 and 17:1. Another year passed before Isaac was born. Now Isaac is perhaps ten years old or more (21:8). Michael Eaton, *Preaching Through the Bible: Genesis 12-23* (Kent, England: Sovereign World, 1999), 117.

¹⁵ See 2 Chron 20:7; Isa 41:8; and Jas 2:23. God also spoke to Moses like a friend speaks to a friend (Exod 33:11). Similarly, David was “a man after God’s own heart” (Acts 13:22) and Daniel was “highly esteemed” by God (Dan 10:19). In the NT, Jesus refers to “Our friend Lazarus” (John 11:11).

¹⁶ See 1 Pet 1:10–12.

¹⁷ Carson comments, “In times past God’s covenant people were not informed of God’s saving plan in the full measure now accorded to Jesus’ disciples. Although there is much they cannot grasp (16:12), within that constraint Jesus has told them everything he has learned from his Father. The Paraclete whom Jesus sends will in the wake of the cross and resurrection complete the revelation bound up with the person and work of Christ (14:26; 16:12–15), thereby making Jesus’ disciples more informed, more privileged, more comprehending than any believers who ever came before (cf. 1 Pet 1:10–12).”

¹⁸ Bob Deffinbaugh, “Abiding in Christ (John 15:1–17)” in *John: The Gospel of Belief*: www.bible.org.

¹⁹ Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 524.

²⁰ Expression from C.S. Lewis and a Francis Thompson poem.

²¹ See Matt 28:19–20.

²² See Matt 22:37–40.

²³ Constable, “Notes on John,” 230: “The NIV translation is misleading. It implies that answers to prayer will be the disciples’ reward for effective fruit-bearing. In the Greek text there are two purpose clauses each introduced by *hina*: ‘that you should go and bear fruit,’ and ‘that whatever you ask the Father . . . He may give you.’ These purposes are coordinate, but logically praying precedes fruit-bearing (cf. 14:12–14; 15:7–8).”

²⁴ See Pujols says he wants to stay with Cards: www.sports.espn.go.com/mlb/news/story?id=4605910; accessed 29 October 2009.