

10 Marks of Friendship for Trying Times

“Keep your friends close but your enemies closer.”

This famous quote by Michael Corleone in the classic film *The Godfather: Part II* may in part explain the thinking of our Lord Jesus in His friendship with His betrayer, Judas. Keeping a watchful eye on our adversaries enables us to be aware of their subtle maneuverings in trying to bring us harm.

While Jesus was a “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matt. 11:19, NKJV) in order to reach them with the gospel, He remained vigilant concerning the tactics of those trying to undermine His life and ministry.

We must do likewise in the midst of our increasingly hostile post-Christian culture. Some who may currently be our enemies may be reached as we engage them in winsome ways. As Abraham Lincoln once said, “Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?”

Others who are hardened in their hearts need to be handled differently and charitably confronted for their devious ways. In our battles for the sanctity of life and the sanctity of marriage, we are obligated to unmask the euphemisms used to cover what is destroying the foundations of our nation. And as Christians awaken and do this, we can expect the intensity of the battle will only increase.

All the more reason why we must seize this period of relative calm to cultivate strong biblical friendships for the difficult days ahead. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 says, “Two are better than one. ... For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to lift him up.” Remember the famous words of Helen Keller: “I would rather walk with a friend in the dark than all alone in the light.”

God is calling us to go deeper with one another while being realistic that genuine friendships take time. Time invested leads to trust, and trust built leads to togetherness. As Aristotle said, "Wishing to be friends is quick work, but friendship is a slow-ripening fruit."

A Friendship Checklist

Muhammad Ali said, "Friendship is the hardest thing in the world to explain. It's not something you learn in school. But if you haven't learned the meaning of friendship, you really haven't learned anything."

The following is a list of 10 biblical characteristics of friendship. In these increasingly trying times, let's suspend any notion of friendship as being something that is merely superficial.

Daily, I get messages like the following on my smartphone: "Joe Schmo wants to be friends on Facebook. You have 37 friends in common." As we proceed, know that this is not the depth of friendship I mean!

1. Friends are few. Proverbs 18:24 says, "A man of many companions may come to ruin" (ESV). I think it was John Maxwell who once said there are four levels of friendship:

- *Just* friends (social)
- *Rust* friends (older ones; some keep and some let go)
- *Trust* friends (confidants and counselors)
- *Must* friends (circle of a few lifelong gifts from God)

2. A friend lays down his life. John 15:13 states, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."

This quality means a willingness to serve and sacrifice for others instead of serving self. John the Baptist demonstrated this: "The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. ... He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:29, 30).

Jane Austen said it best: "There is nothing I would not do for those who are really my friends. I have no notion of loving people by halves; it is not my nature."

3. A friend really knows you. "I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15).

A true friend is someone with whom you can be transparent and authentic. In the words of C.S. Lewis, "Friendship is born at that moment when one man says to another, 'What! You too? I thought that no one but myself.'"

4. A friend loves unconditionally. Proverbs 17:17 reveals, "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity." Keep in mind, loyalty is only tested in adversity, and pressure reveals the person.

William Shakespeare said, "A friend is one that knows you as you are, understands where you have been, accepts what you have become, and still gently allows you to grow."

5. A friend is available for counsel. Proverbs 27:9 records, "Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel."

Don't you thank God for people He puts in our life as friends who will tell us at times not what we want to hear, but what we need to hear?

6. A friend speaks the truth in love. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy" (Prov. 27:6).

Mark Twain remarked, "Good friends, good books and a sleepy conscience—this is the good life." Not really! Those times our conscience gets dull, that's when we need friends to bring

necessary adjustment.

When I read with an ache in my heart of the recent divorce decision of Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin, who dismissed it as a “conscious uncoupling,” I prayed and wondered how different things could’ve been had they identified as Bible-believing Christians with godly friends who could have spoken the truth in love to them in their time of need.

7. A friend encourages you. “For the despairing man there should be kindness from his friend” (Job 6:14, NASB). Job needed more than what his own wife gave him when she said, “Curse God and die!” (Job 2:9). Real support, huh?

Encouragement comes primarily from God through His Word, but also through trusted friends like a Barnabas (whose name means “son of encouragement”).

8. A friend will clash with you. Proverbs 27:17 says, “As Iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend” (NKJV).

Conflict in marriage and friendship is not something from which to retreat. It’s healthy. It’s meant not be a setback but a springboard to greater development of character and a deeper knitting of friends.

As we approach our 38th wedding anniversary, my wife and I can say we have had probably 1,000 or more conflicts. As we’ve drawn on the grace of God, we’ve resolved our differences and become stronger in the process.

9. A friend is sensitive to the other’s emotional state. “Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death, is the man who deceives his neighbor, and says, ‘I was only joking!’” (Prov. 26:18-19).

Simply stated, a genuine friend will be sensitive to your vulnerable areas. He stays away from putdowns, sarcasm and

cruel practical jokes. Scripture gives a good example in Proverbs 27:14: "He who blesses his friend with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, it will be counted a curse to him."

10. A friend is loyal. Proverbs 16:28 states, "A whisperer separates the best of friends." Proverbs 17:9 reinforces this with, "He who repeats a matter separates friends."

In the turbulent times that lie before us (again, barring a national spiritual awakening), we need to keep uppermost the warning of our Lord Jesus that men "will betray one another" (Matt. 24:10).

Remember where we started: "Keep your friends close but your enemies closer."

In spite of what may come, let's give ourselves to intentionally building meaningful and strong friendships. May we also take consolation in knowing we are friends of God and can remain secure in the One who always remains "a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Prov. 18:24).

Larry Tomczak is a best-selling author and cultural commentator with more than 41 years of trusted ministry experience. His passion is to bring perspective, analysis and insight from a biblical worldview. He loves awakening people to today's cultural realities and responses needed for a restored, influential church. Please visit.