

Loving Jesus Wholeheartedly When Your Loved Ones Don't

I remember the transition from high school to college so well. I remember the newfound freedom. It was more than independence. It was a freedom to be who I always wanted to be in my relationship with Jesus. It was a fresh start: to find spaces to pray, read the Word, and actually begin to lay hold of who I was made to be in Christ. College me was everything that I thought that high school me could never be. I was so relieved and grateful to leave high school me behind.

High school, for me, represented a prison of expectations. It was an enclosed space in which I was stuck, for hours a day, with so many different groups of people. I cared about some of those people. There were others I didn't care very much for at all. Whichever category someone happened to fall into, however, all of them impacted me to one degree or another—whether I liked it or not. I was unsure of who I really was, shaky in my newfound faith in Jesus, and fighting daily not to surrender to the feelings of inferiority that haunted me daily. Because of this, I was shaped—powerfully—by the opinions of both friends and enemies alike.

I mostly didn't like myself. I didn't like the person I seemingly needed to become to make friendships and relationships work. It wasn't until my senior year of high school that I was able to begin to discover the real me, and enjoy friendships based on who I really was and not who I thought people wanted me to be. Most of the friendships that I enjoyed, however, weren't the kind that pushed me to pursue Jesus and love Him well. Graduation, for me, represented freedom and a fresh start. As a college freshman, I pursued Jesus with all of the intensity I couldn't sustain as a teenager. I was lonely—I didn't have as many friends as I did in high school—but I was happy.

Enduring Friendships and Temporary Companions

What I didn't know in high school—and discovered powerfully in college—was the temporary nature of friendships not built on love for Jesus. Friendships in our younger years are often built on the commonality of circumstance: same neighborhood, same school and same interests. Commonality of circumstance isn't a strong enough foundation to endure the pressures, trials and transitions of life. What we consider friendship in our younger years is often little more than “enjoyable companionship,” or camaraderie. We are loyal to the relationships but often unaware of the very shallow foundation that they are built on.

We were made for intimate connection and deep relationships. We reach out to those around us and draw great comfort and a powerful sense of belonging from those who accept us, enjoy us, and spend time with us. Yet the surface commonalities and interests that drew us together are not powerful enough to hold us together. It takes the transformative love of Jesus working in us to draw us out of our fear, our self-protection, and the way that we hide around each other in plain sight. The pretending and the posturing grows wearisome after a while. Our interests and locations change over time; life situations transition. Before we know it, long-time companions move on. So do we.

True friendships have more than affection and loyalty at their core. The powerful “binding agent” of lasting friendships is the love of Jesus that empowers us to love selflessly and fearlessly. Jesus imparts, through the way that He loves us, the ability to love others deeply and freely. The love of Jesus makes it possible to truly care for, fight for, and serve our friends without worry or fear that they will not love us back. The love of Jesus frees us from the need to fight for ourselves, to protect ourselves, or take the weaknesses and deficiencies of those we love personally. His love is what makes true friendships endure the difficult

seasons of life. I've found that my deepest friendships—the ones that have lasted for decades—have nothing to do with common interests, compatible personalities, or common relationships. The Lord has knit my heart to people I never thought I would be friends with, but whom I now love and enjoy deeply.

"That sounds great," you may be thinking in response, *"but I think you've forgotten the title of this article."*

I know it seems like it, but before I give the really hard advice, it seemed important to me to define the difference between friends and companions so we understand the different kinds of relationships we'll have over the course of our lives.

"Again, I appreciate that," you may be replying as you read this, *"but I don't work where you do. There aren't any passionate Christians where I live. If I'm going to have any friends, they're going to be non-Christians or Christians who are trying to make life work but ..."*

They don't love Jesus like you do?

"Right. I mean, it sounds so cruel, or prideful, to say it like that."

I get it.

As I warned, I was setting the stage for the really hard advice.

Permission to Love Jesus

The people we choose to surround ourselves with—friends, companions and comrades—all work together to provide a culture of "permission" that we draw from to love Jesus (or not). What was true for me as a teenager and a young adult is still true for me today: Do my friends allow me to object to objectionable speech? Do they allow me to express passion for

Jesus and loyalty to His word, or do they roll their eyes and passively aggressively pressure me to “dial it down”? I’ve been around a number of people over the years who have allowed cynicism to cause them to subtly (or overtly) push back against passionate Christianity. They’ve decided passion isn’t worth it, that Christianity isn’t real, or that, even if it is real, they want to do their own thing.

I choose my friends carefully. I think of my relationships like a target with a bullseye. The ones who occupy the center space—the bullseye—are the ones who go beyond giving me permission to love Jesus and actually spur me on and provoke me to love Jesus more. They initiate course corrections and times of repentance. They care about my destiny in Christ and fight for my good. They have the courage to speak honestly to me when I need it. I recognize that these kinds of friends are rare, but I know now that they are also worth waiting for. A friend like this doesn’t just pop into our lives. Normally a relationship begins somewhere in the “outer ring” of familiarity and companionship and blossoms over time into a sweet and enjoyable friendship. They move naturally closer from the outer ring to the inner ring. They aren’t a close and trusted friendship yet, but there is clearly life and joy in the friendship, and it bears good fruit.

I’ve found that almost all relationships start in the outer ring before they become true friendships. The mistake that most young people make is that we allow relationships to get too close, too quickly before we test the fruit. We prioritize friendship with those who are in our lives in that season over friendship with Jesus. Over time, we regret that decision as the intimacy and time spent make it clear that we are wanting to head in a very different direction from the one our friend is taking. On the one hand, we don’t feel the permission to go hard after Jesus and, on the other, we don’t know how to have the hard and honest conversation that feels like we are rejecting our friend.

If you're in that situation now, take heart, but also take courage. It is likely that there is a need for quiet repentance in prayer and resolve to put Jesus back in His rightful place in your life. This needs to be followed by a difficult but necessary and honest conversation. While you may love your friend, neither of you are served by compromising your destiny in the name of loyalty. Your friend doesn't want that, and neither do you. While your friend may not understand making changes in the relationship so that you can grow your heart for Jesus, they do understand the need for you to genuinely be who you were made to be.

The Healthiest Boundary

My closest friendships and relationships, then, are reserved for those who hold one critical core value: Jesus is worthy of all my affection, attention and passion. This core value establishes a necessary and healthy boundary related to every one of my relationships. If a person does not possess this core value, I can love them and enjoy them, but I know the relationship can only go so far. Some relationships may not possess this core value, but they aren't resistant to it either. While they may not have the same vision for life and ministry that I do, there are many whom I consider good friends who have been a genuine blessing to me over the years. The deeper the agreement on my primary core value, the deeper the friendship can grow and progress.

Deciding on this boundary can result in some radical changes to present relationships as well as limit other potential friendships in our immediate future. This is why the advice is hard. However, the sacrifice made today to love Jesus well has a beautiful and powerful payoff in the years to come. Loving Jesus well may mean choosing a measure of loneliness now. Doing so, however, almost guarantees rich, meaningful, beautiful friendships with like-minded people down the road. Like anything in life, one of the key questions that defines us is: Are we willing to wait (and fight) for the highest and

the best, or will we settle for less out of fear before we get there?

How can you grow in loving your friends like Jesus does? {eo}

Fascinate, our high school conference, is a great place for individual teens and entire youth groups to grow their relationship with God, with others, and to find their calling in life. (Fascinate is included with ATC High School Camp 1). Learn more about Fascinate »

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