

Move Beyond a Free-Agent Friendship

“I haven’t had a friend in years.” The comment surprised me. I knew it was (sort of) a joke, but there was enough truth in it to reveal the frustration.

In years of working with men, I’ve never had a guy say, “You know, I just have too many deep friendships.” No, whenever I share about biblical friendship, guys almost always say, “I need friends like that.”

It’s important to think about how we define “friend.” Several years ago, I was talking about a work relationship with a mentor, and he asked, “Is this person your friend because it’s convenient, or is he really a friend?”

It is a good question. In various relationships, I’ve found a different answer to that question. Most of the time, it is easy to tell the difference, but I’ve had a few times when I’ve mistaken one for the other. Those are the ones that hurt. For some guys, those hurts pile up and eventually lead to withdrawal.

I think that is one reason that Proverbs 18:24 says, “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (ESV). The reality is that many people are companions but very few are friends.

We need to distinguish between the two. In my experience working with men, I find that most men fill their calendar with companions. They have co-workers, neighbors and fantasy football buddies, but these are almost always companions rather than friends.

Companions are easy to find. Of course, they are also easy (and fairly painless) to lose. I refer to these as “free agent

friends.” They are happy to be your friend as long as it’s convenient. But, like a football player seeking a better contract, they will take the best deal that comes along.

This isn’t all bad. It’s how the world works. We can’t be great friends with everyone. We don’t have the time or emotional energy to even try. What concerns me, however, is that most men only have free-agent friendships, and they are missing out on the greatness of true friendship.

Seeking Faithful Friends

The Bible says that “a friend loves at all times” (Prov. 17:17). This shows us both the kind of commitment and the quality of commitment a friend gives. Love is self-sacrificial action. This means you choose to absorb the needs of the other person. As followers of Jesus, we learn from Jesus what this means. He absorbed our sin so that we could receive his life. This remains the greatest self-sacrificial action that the world has ever known. A friend follows Jesus’ example by offering this kind of self-sacrificing love to another.

Looking back at Proverbs 17:17, note the little prepositional phrase “at all times.” This is the extent of the love that a friend offers. True friends become anchors for us during storms. They rise up when the need calls. They also rejoice when we succeed. They throw parties for us when it’s time to celebrate. In good and bad, they are present and acting on our behalf. Love is loyal.

I want to offer one other truth that distinguishes a mere companion from a loyal friend. When I said “love is loyal” above, you may have been tempted to hear “love always agrees with me.” But loyalty does not equal agreement. Because we are fallen and sinful men in constant need of repentance, we are sometimes deceived about ourselves. We need friends who love us enough to help us become more faithful followers of Jesus.

Proverbs 27:6 says, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend.” Out

of love for us, true friends will speak the truth we need to hear, not just the words we want to hear. They seek our greatest good even when we aren't seeking it for ourselves.

A companion may wound you by something they say, but it is not an act of loyal love. Wounds of a companion are often hurtful rather than helpful. But when a loyal friend speaks hard truth to you, you can receive the wound knowing that it will bring out the best in you.

Still, it isn't easy. It is risky to trust. You might get hurt. Again. On the other hand, I'm convinced that this is a risk worth taking. The only way to find a true friend is to put yourself out there. The first time you share with a friend how you feel (and use a feeling word like, lonely or hurt or sad or angry or disappointed), you may feel unsure of yourself.

The first time you allow a friend to show you how you mishandled a situation, you will feel vulnerable. When you invite someone to do something fun on a Friday night, you may wonder whether or not they enjoyed the time.

Even considering these risks, I'm convinced that it is far more risky to move through life isolated, guarded and lonely. Life is too hard not to have someone in your corner, cheering you on as you enter another round of the battle. Friendship is worth it, but it will take commitment to make the jump from free-agent to faithful friendship.

For the original article, visit [this link](#).

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