

Showing Spirit-Filled Mercy When People Misunderstand You

I had a circle of 9 friends in high school and lived with about the same number of friends all throughout college—I always had a “group.” I thought, then, isn’t that just supposed to be how friendship works? It mysteriously comes together and is always available and easy. (Ha!) In high school and college, we bonded over Friday night football games and chips and salsa and raw cookie dough splurges at midnight. As I got older, however, I began to learn that friendship is something that is forged. It is not happenstance and you need a whole lot more than salsa and cookie dough to keep it together.

Christine Hoover’s book Messy Beautiful Friendship spoke right to where I am yes, pushing forty and still learning how to do friendship well. (And the sweet thing is that Christine and I met, through a mutual, beloved friend who has since gone home to the Lord—so we share this common desire to do friendship well, and through thick and thin.) Today, I get to share Christine’s words with you below and encourage you, if you are like most every women who struggles to figure out how to do godly friendship, well ... go buy her book.

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The words came through an email and, as I skimmed through, I at first assumed I hadn’t read them correctly. My heart began beating quickly as I reread the first few lines and saw that, in fact, I’d read it right the first time. The biting words sunk in deep. A friend had misunderstood me and not given me the benefit of the doubt, and she was writing to let me know I had disappointed her.

We’ve all been hurt by someone we considered a friend, whether

it's an inconsiderate word or an unexpected betrayal. I've discovered that when it happens to me, as it did through that email, it's my natural tendency, like many others, to pull away, erect protective barriers around my vulnerability, and let the friendship fade into the background as if it never existed.

Sometimes, when the wound is especially deep, our tendency is not just to write the friend off but also to write *friendship* off. We're hurt so badly that we give ourselves over to cynicism, bitterness and resentment, and we wonder if friendship is worth the risk of wading through the emotions and hurts, attempting reconciliation, and making ourselves vulnerable again. We are friendly and sociable at a safe distance, but heart-level friendship? It's too hard and too risky, and it never quite lives up to our exacting wish-dreams. With that ideal view in mind, it's far too easy to feel insecure about or frustrated with reality.

I tend to want to cast the responsibility or the blame for my imperfect friendships on others, but it works both ways. Sometimes I am the one that hurts others, something I inadvertently did this year. Although my friend whom I hurt brought it to my attention, at first I remained blind to the way I was wounding her, wanting to blame her instead. But she brought it to my attention again, just as clear and gentle as the first time, and I finally saw what my protective barriers had kept me from seeing and how they had been used as weapons instead of defense. This friend challenged me to stay in the friendship and work through our differences rather than keep my distance, something that felt risky to me but in the end has been worth it and, I know, honors the Lord.

Isn't this what true, biblical friendship is about: being willing to love, forgive, and bear with those we might not necessarily always understand? And being willing to confess sin, inadvertent or not, and receive the grace that helps us grow? This is certainly more what it's about than dinner

parties and game nights. Biblical friendship is what helps us grow; it sharpens us just as we are used by God to sharpen others.

Over coffee, a young woman in my church and I discussed these things together, about how we have this stubborn belief that friendship can actually be what we ideally picture in our heads. She said she wished people would invite her to more things and talked about how it seemed like everyone was always getting together without her. I said I sometimes envied certain relationships and resented that I wasn't included in them. After confessing our self-focused thoughts to one another, the conversation turned to what true friendship is and what it looks like in reality.

Isn't it, we said, an ongoing effort? Doesn't it require commitment and perseverance? Isn't it having to deal biblically with our inevitable hurts, being quick to forgive, crossing life-stage boundaries and refusing to put other women in categories? Isn't it pushing through discomfort and refusing to give up on people even when they disappoint us? And perhaps the most important question: Isn't it the greater blessing to *be* a person who seeks this type of community rather than clinging to false ideals and waiting for it to just "happen" to us?

While it *is* a greater blessing, we determined that it's also risky. We must look to serve rather than be served, which means it's possible that we might not be served in the ways we hope. We must be ever willing to broaden the circle, which means we must have an eye for the outsider rather than an eye for how we can be insiders, and it's possible we might be forgotten in the process. We must be willing to address sin and conflict in an appropriate way, which means it's possible we might be rejected. We must be willing to be vulnerable, which means we might be misunderstood and grace might not be extended to us.

Instead of holding fast to our ideals, we need to cling to a new definition of friendship, one that allows for awkwardness and risk and fumbling through, because isn't the road to true friendship paved by these very things? Paul offers us a definition for friendship that we'd do better to cling to than our false ideals:

So embrace, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, a spirit of mercy, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, and longsuffering. Bear with one another and forgive one another. If anyone has a quarrel against anyone, even as Christ forgave you, so you must do. And above all these things, embrace love, which is the bond of perfection. Let the peace of God, to which also you are called in one body, rule in your hearts. And be thankful (Col. 3:12-15).

Paul certainly goes beyond vacationing together and small talk and waiting for someone else to initiate. He exhorts us to *actively pursue* being a godly friend to others—to *actively pursue* being patient, forgiving, loving, and being thankful for others as we relate to them. The focus is on what we give to others, not what they give to us. We don't do these things because we hope to get something in return, friendship or whatever else. We do these things because that is how Christ showed His love toward us, and because biblical friendship will always model itself after Him.

Until heaven, our community will never be perfect; it's inevitable that we will experience hurt and disappointment in our relationships. But it's worth the risk. By actively pursuing others in the way Christ pursues us, we extend an invitation for the friendship we desire but we also discover the beautiful and always-faithful way in which Christ relates to us. Because we have an anchor that's sure and steadfast, because we recognize friendship as a gift, we're willing to embrace the reality of friendship—messiness and all.

*Reprinted with permission from . This post is an excerpt from **Christine Hoover's** new book, Messy Beautiful Friendship: Finding and Nurturing Deep and Lasting Relationships, which explores the joys and complexities of friendship among Christian women. Christine is a pastor's wife, mom to three boys, and the author of several books, including From Good to Grace and Messy Beautiful Friendship. Through her blog, , she enjoys encouraging the people of God to apply gospel truths to their honest thoughts, especially in the areas of grace, community and friendship. Christine and her family live in Charlottesville, Virginia.*