

Recovering the Lost Gift of True Friendship

Last week one of my best friends showed me what it really means to selflessly lay down your life.

Last week one of my best friends, Chris Maxwell, organized a two-day prayer gathering for me in north Georgia, where he serves as the pastor of a Christian college. Chris had listened to me whine for months about how confused I was about my future. He took it upon himself to contact a group of my friends, and they agreed to take time off work to pray with me about some important decisions.

Chris not only gathered nine men for this prayer retreat, but he also solicited counsel from other friends who couldn't attend, and from my wife. When I sat down in that living room on the first night, they put me under a microscope and proceeded to meddle in all my business. It was 48 hours of probing questions, wise counsel, sober warnings, gushing encouragement, brotherly affection and in-your-face honesty.

"True friends pray for each other. The prophet Samuel even wrote: 'Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you' (1 Sam. 12:23)."

Uncomfortable?

Definitely. Embarrassing? At times. Humbling? Totally. But the pain was worth what I gained in the end.

One of the main things I gained was a renewed understanding of how important true friendship is. In this day of unprecedented social isolation (when many pastors admit they have no one to talk to) and in this season of tragic moral failure (when church leaders wait too late before they expose their weaknesses to anyone) I have learned that we cannot survive long without godly relationships. Here are three qualities we must reclaim:

1. True

friendship requires sacrifice. I was blown away that nine guys from four states would take time out of their busy schedules to pray for me. One guy drove all the way from Pennsylvania; two others drove more than seven hours. When we were finished, several of the guys expressed amazement that Chris went to so much trouble. "Lee is so blessed to have a friend like you," one of them said.

Real friends do extravagant things to show their love. They don't just do what is expected—they go the second mile. Real friendship always cuts against the grain of selfishness. Jesus told his closest friends: "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13, NASB). A few

hours after He said that, He was arrested, beaten and nailed to a cross.

2. True

friendship requires transparency. Jonathan and David are models of friendship because they didn't allow their positions, titles or ambitions to separate them. Even though Jonathan was Saul's son, and the rightful heir to the throne, he recognized the call of God on his friend David and set aside his own agenda.

The Bible says in

1 Samuel 18:3-4: "Then

Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan

stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, with his

armor, including his sword and his bow and his belt." Jonathan wasn't going

through an airport security check; he took off his outer garment and weapons

because these things represented his future status as a warrior king. He was

signifying to David: "I'm putting you first." The same humility is required of

us if we want genuine friendships.

At one point

during our prayer retreat last week, the guys took turns sharing their most

serious prayer concerns. Before we went around the circle we pledged not to

divulge anyone's secrets. Then, with full confidence that no one was going to

condemn anyone, we took our body armor off, let our force fields down and

spilled our guts.

It wasn't long before the tears began to flow. I don't know if you've ever seen a group of grown men crying—but I can tell you it is one of the most beautiful sights on earth. One guy unashamedly offered a box of Kleenex to those who couldn't keep their emotions under control. We weren't worried about looking weak. We knew the Father was pleased that a group of guys had discovered that true manhood is about vulnerability, not about acting tough.

3.
True friendship requires prayer. Ever since I became friends with Chris Maxwell in the late 1990s he has prayed for me faithfully. Often I get a simple text message from him that says: "PRAYING FOR YOU." It reminds me of the heart of the apostle Paul, who wrote to his spiritual son Timothy: "I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did, *as I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day*" (2 Tim. 1:3).

It might be safe to say that our love for our friends and family can be measured by our prayers for them. True friends pray for each other. The prophet Samuel even wrote: "Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you" (1 Sam. 12:23).

Few of us would make an appointment with a friend for coffee and then nonchalantly forget to

show up. But how many of us have told a friend, "I'll pray for you," and then forgotten to breathe one word of prayer for him or her? I've recently gone back to using a written list to help me remember my friends' prayer needs, and to record answers.

My life was changed last week because some friends cared enough about me to get in my face, hold my feet to the fire and offer biblical encouragement and counsel. If you don't have friends like that in your life, I pray you will find them soon. And more importantly, I pray you will be that kind of a friend to someone else.

J. Lee Grady is contributing editor of *Charisma* and author of the new book *The Holy Spirit Is Not for Sale*. Follow him on Twitter at leegrady.