

Friends

Introduction. A couple was once on the hunt for a Christmas tree. The man selling the trees noticed that they didn't have a lot to their names. After bypassing trees that were too expensive, they found a pine that was okay on one side but pretty bare on the other. Then they picked up another tree that was not much better — full on one side, scraggly on the other. She whispered something, and he asked if \$3 would be okay. The seller figured both trees wouldn't sell, so he agreed.

A few days later, the man selling the trees saw a beautiful tree in the couple's apartment window. It was thick and well rounded. He knocked on their door, and they told him how they had pushed the two trees together where the branches were thin and tied the trunks together. The branches overlapped and formed a tree so thick you couldn't see the wire. He said it looked like "a tiny forest of its own."

"So that's the secret," he thought. "You take two trees that aren't perfect; that have flaws; that might even be homely; that maybe nobody else would want. If you put them together just right, you create something really beautiful."

The relationship of "friend" is first mentioned in Genesis 26:26. Abimelech, king of the Philistines, had a friend named Ahuzath. From that place forward, "friend," "friends," and "friendliness" are mentioned 116 times in the text of scripture.

A friend is a person with whom one has a bond of mutual affection. Friendship is one of this life's great relationships. The Bible shows us great examples of friendship in its pages, and our lesson will explore three people who were great friends: A friend who was willing to do for others; a friend who was willing to encourage the best in others; and, a friend who was willing to look beyond self for others. These may not be the first ones that come to your mind, but they certainly characterize true friendship.

I. Tabitha Was A Friend (Acts 9:36-39)

- A. When we are introduced to Tabitha we are told some special facts about her. She was a "disciple." There are qualifications to meet in order to be recognized as a "disciple of Christ." It means one who has submitted themselves to Christ (Matthew 16:24-27), one who has obeyed His instructions (John 8:31-32; 14:15), and one who continuously abides in His teachings (2 John 9).
- B. "She was full of good works and charitable deeds." The term "full" is an indication of her ability. She was fully capable of good works and charitable deeds. She possessed the talent to do what was needed.
- C. "Which she did." This is a very important part of her description. It one thing to possess the ability; it is quite another to use it as we can and should (James 4:17). It is a tremendous blessing that we have talents — but only if we use them. Our abilities need to be recognized and initiated in the doing of God's will. This notion is apparent from passages like Romans 12:6-8. One may have a talent for speaking, serving, teaching, and encouraging. Timothy was incredibly regarded by Paul (Philippians 2:18-23), and I have to believe it was in part because he was willing to use his talents.
- D. From Tabitha we learn that a friend does what they can do; she made and provided clothing. A friend does not wait for a greater need to act on. Never be

worried about gaining the recognition of doing some substantial act while lesser acts get left undone. Maybe providing articles of clothing was seen as inconsequential, but Tabitha was willing to apply herself to meeting the need. Sometimes the little acts are what loom large in the heart. The people's displays of her clothing shows how "inconsequential" it really was to them.

- E. A friend is a valuable part of the lives they touch. Those widows needed her friendship, and it was important that she was a friend to them.

II. Philemon Was A Friend (Philemon 1-7)

- A. There is a lot to be gained from a good understanding of this epistle. Our focus, however, is the character of Philemon. His name is only mentioned one time in the scriptures. Even with this limited information, we are told some special details about this man.
- B. Paul calls him a "beloved friend." True friends are the ones that we develop an appreciation and love for. The RV in Proverbs 18:24 says, "He that maketh many friends doeth it to his own destruction: but there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother." Friends can definitely mean more to us than even family.
- C. Paul says that he is a "fellow laborer." Paul considered Philemon as an equal. One who labors (preaches and teaches) in the gospel has the responsibility of preaching only "the word" (2 Timothy 4:1-5). He "refreshed the hearts of the saints." Philemon applied himself to the encouragement of his brethren. It is difficult to stay zealous as we wait for our reward; this is why we are encouraged many times (Galatians 6:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:13; Hebrews 12:3).
- D. From Philemon we learn that a friend can truly become a "beloved" person in our lives — they become an essential part of who we are. A friend applies themselves to encourage the best in us (Proverbs 27:17). What true friend would want us to fail? A true friend wants you to be the best you can be, and the best anyone can be is a godly, righteous, faithful Christian.
 - 1. Be careful of the influences friends have in your life (1 Corinthians 15:33). Godly people stay godly because they have godly influences.
 - 2. I've had to limit my exposure to friends that I like being around because I know they're not good influences on me.
 - 3. Jonadab was an example of an evil friend (2 Samuel 13:3) and Jonathan was an example of a good friend (1 Samuel 20:41). It takes a lot of spiritual wisdom, understanding, and discretion to "choose the good part" (Luke 10:42) and pick beneficial friends.
- E. A friend is a valuable part of the lives they touch. The brethren needed his friendship; it was important that he was a friend to them.

III. Epaphroditus Was A Friend (Philippians 2:25-30)

- A. Epaphroditus was certainly a true friend. Paul describes him as "brother." "Brother" is not a "title" to be worn like a nametag; it is a description of devotion, care, and kinship. Brotherly love is what is described in the great love passage of 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. To become a brother who offers kindness and love, one must develop it (2 Peter 1:5-10).

- B. "Fellow laborer and soldier." It was noteworthy in this description that Epaphroditus was equal to Paul, just as we saw in the description of Philemon.
- C. "One who ministered." "Minister" is another defining description that has become a title of designation; it should be describing our servitude for each other. We actively seek our responsibility (Romans 12:13; Galatians 6:2; 1 Peter 4:8-10). Sadly, Paul often had to do his work alone (2 Timothy 4:16).
- D. "... for the work of Christ he came close to death." The task of meeting Paul's needs, and fulfilling his own role in Christ, was wearing Epaphroditus down. Paul declared that Epaphroditus "did not regard his own life." He refused to put himself first in his determination to help.
- E. From Epaphroditus we learn that a friend can be selfless in his dedication. A friend is truly concerned about the well-being of his friends. What true friend would see us go without the necessities of life (1 John 3:17-18)? A true friend will provide for our survival — physically and spiritually. In this way, Epaphroditus was like Christ (John 15:13), for He was willing to lay down His life for His friends.
- F. A friend is a valuable part of the lives they touch. Paul needed his friendship; it was important that he was a friend to him.

Conclusion. Friendship is one of the great relationships of life. It is great for us when we mutually do "good" for one another, encourage the best in one another, and are able to look beyond self for each other (cp. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12). In order for us to follow these good examples, we have to take on these good traits.

If I am to be a true friend, I must share with you the hope of heaven. The gospel is what you truly need (Romans 1:16). Obedience is the way to access its hope (James 1:17-22). The only certain opportunity is this present moment. Will you gain a relationship with Christ today?

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