

# Categories of friendship

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When the Lord Jesus was referred to as "a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners!" in Matthew 11: 19, it was a criticism brought against Him by those who also said (in the same verse), "Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard". They did not appreciate Him in the quality of His love for those despised by the general population, nor did they identify with Him in His freedom of heart to live on the basis of meaningful fellowship with God rather than following the ideas of men regarding what constituted true spirituality.

Why was the Lord Jesus a friend to people who were not of good moral character? Was He close to them? Could He have deep fellowship with them? Could He trust them with important and personal aspects of His life and His mission? The answer to these questions is a uniform and clear, "No."

The Scriptures record an incident, relevant to this subject, in this way: "Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, beholding His signs which He was doing" (John 2: 23). For many others, such a response from the people could easily bring gladness to them, and lead them towards a closer friendship with the people who "believed" in them. However, the next two verses tell us that the Lord Jesus responded very differently from what others

might readily do: "But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man."

This incident helps us to differentiate different categories of friendship. Although the Lord Jesus is a friend to all mankind, because He loves them and He wants to help them for their good, yet He will not be close to them in a mutual relationship of deep friendship when He sees the self-centred and self-seeking direction in their hearts. We could perhaps refer to the first category of friendship as a "friendship of concern", while the second category could be regarded as a "friendship of purity of heart".

In this world, we see another category of friendship that is very common, which could be described as a "friendship of mutual benefit", where people become friends primarily because of what they can gain from relating with the other person, where they may also be willing to give to some degree. The Lord Jesus said to His disciples in Luke 6: 32-34, "And if you love those who love you, what credit is *that* to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is *that* to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is *that* to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, in order to receive back the same *amount*." This type of friendship may at times be of some help, mutually, but it will not be very deep because the self-seeking element is a significant motivating factor. Many develop such friendships because they will have friends "for all occasions" – they have some friends who will go out with them to play games, others with whom they could enjoy sight-seeing together, others with whom they could discuss subjects of mutual interest, others who would be glad to

exchange stories and gossip, and others with whom they could comfort each other in their pain and problems.

Another type of friendship, which is dangerous and destructive, is the "friendship of exploitation" where the relationship is cultivated with the intention of taking advantage of the other person – it is a false kind of friendship and it occurs readily when one is rich, or talented, or influential, or physically attractive. Beware of those who praise you and flatter you, who seem so appreciative of you, or seem to be so helpful to you, who seem to be always so pleasant to be with – the purpose may be to develop such a "friendship of exploitation".

Although there are different categories of friendship, these are not always mutually exclusive. There can be different degrees of mixtures in many relationships. A person who seeks to exploit others may at times also be concerned for the welfare of others. One who is seeking for mutual benefit may at times long for a friendship of purity of heart. It is therefore necessary to be vigilant and careful as we may be readily mistaken if we are more readily impressed by outward conduct rather than the moral and spiritual direction in the heart.

It is obvious therefore that the most valuable kind of friendship is the "friendship of purity of heart". However, this is also the most difficult to develop. The Lord Jesus said to His disciples, "You are My friends, if you do what I command you" (John 15: 14). This means that if they wanted to live according to their own selfish way, they could not be His friends in this kind of sense, as their hearts would not be pure. If we want to nurture this kind of friendship, then we must be prepared to deal with the self-life in all its completeness. We must learn in practical daily living, to deny ourselves, to take up our cross daily and follow the Lord. Obeying the commandments of the Lord purifies our heart,

because His commandments are good and pure and they bring spiritual life and moral quality to our hearts when we choose to obey Him.

While the "friendship of purity of heart" is of great value and meaning, we also need to be aware that there are different levels of friendship and this bears a direct relationship with the level of purity of heart. The Lord Jesus tells us clearly, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5: 8). Our depth of oneness with God, our quality of friendship and fellowship with Him, is dependent on how deeply we have developed to become like the Lord Jesus, to what extent the fruit of the Spirit has grown in our being.

While we pursue the path of "friendship of purity of heart", we could also prayerfully seek the Lord to teach us how to love others and care for their well-being, and develop the "friendship of concern" with others, yet with carefulness and regulation, according to our stage of development and the Lord's intention for our lives.