

Higher levels of friendship

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The Lord Jesus said to His disciples, "You are My friends, if you do what I command you" (John 15: 14). This clearly means that this kind of friendship with the Lord Jesus is conditional – it is present only when there is obedience to His commands. Were the disciples then truly His friends? Did they obey Him? Were they faithful to Him?

In Luke 6: 46, the Lord Jesus said to His disciples, "And why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" Should we then conclude that they were not His friends? However, when the Lord Jesus prayed to the Father, as recorded in John 17: 6, when referring to His disciples, He said, "they have kept Thy word". Would this not imply that they were His friends? How then should we appreciate the two passages together?

The Lord Jesus was teaching His disciples the principle of true friendship with Him. We know that in reality, there are different levels of faithfulness to the Lord and there are different degrees of obedience to His commands. This leads to different levels of friendship with Him, because the level of true friendship with the Lord is directly related to the quality of our oneness with Him. This is dependent on the degree of purity of heart on our part, as He is always morally and spiritually perfect. This is the same principle that the Lord Jesus taught in Matthew 5: 8, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." The quality of our friendship with God, the depth of our oneness with Him, the richness of our fellowship with Him, is directly dependent on the level of purity of our heart – our moral and spiritual character. As we choose this path, we begin the development of this category of friendship with God – the

friendship of purity of heart. The scope and the potential of this friendship is infinite, as God is infinite, and we can continue to nurture, deepen and grow in this friendship no matter how far we may have developed.

The Lord Jesus emphasized obedience to Him as a condition for this kind of friendship because it is only as we learn to obey Him deeply that our moral and spiritual character will be transformed to be like Him – we learn to deny ourselves and our own self-centred desires, and give ourselves for that which is pure and holy and good. We should also remember that friendship is voluntary – we choose our friends, we decide whether we want to cultivate such a friendship. Hence, if we want to develop friendship with the Lord Jesus, we must consider thoroughly whether we are glad and grateful to walk in this path that He is calling us towards – we should never complain when the path is painful and difficult.

It is important to note that the Lord Jesus, in introducing the subject of friendship to His disciples, referred to another kind of relationship that preceded the development of this kind of friendship. He explained, "No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you" (John 15: 15).

He said that He was no longer calling them slaves, which means that this was the relationship that had been established first. It shows us that the disciples had to willingly learn to be good and faithful slaves of the Lord before they could develop true friendship with Him. It was the training ground for them, to help them turn away from the life of self-seeking to a life of submission and obedience to a perfect Master. Without such submission and obedience, we cannot be good friends of the Lord. The apostle Paul learnt this well and he gladly and gratefully referred to himself as "a bond-servant of God" (Titus 1: 1), as he realized how meaningful it is to submit to, and obey, the One who is perfectly good and perfectly wise, as well as perfectly powerful.

Many Christians want to be friends with the Lord Jesus before learning to be His slaves. In so doing, they readily become presumptuous and irreverent in their relationship with Him. They do not treasure His instructions to them. Instead, they may even "demand an explanation" from Him when life is difficult, when they are perplexed or distressed. Their primary concern is not what is in the heart of the Lord, but what it is that they desire. This kind of spirit prevents us from developing true friendship with the Lord - He cannot be close to us and He cannot meaningfully share with us what is in His heart.

When people choose their friends, they often give much weight to what they can benefit from the friendship. Though there may be some degree of concern for others, the more important issue is what they can receive from the relationship. When they do not obtain what they desire, they may abandon the friendship and regard it as a failure.

In great contrast, when God chooses to be a Friend to us, His primary concern is how He can most meaningfully benefit us and what He can give to us that is truly valuable and precious. A primary aspect of true friendship is love that is self-giving, rather than emotional attachment and enjoyment for self-gratification. This is the kind of love that the Lord Jesus described in John 15: 13, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." If we want to develop a higher level of friendship, we must learn in a deeper way the path of self-giving in a spirit of divine love.

As we grow in the quality of friendship with the Lord, we may also find ourselves more distant from those whose values and pursuits belong to the realm of this world. We may experience increasing difficulty in meaningfully sharing with the many friends we used to have, as we realize that our common ground has diminished in relation to what is deepest in our hearts. The choice of our friendship will affect other friendships. In James 4: 4, we are clearly and solemnly cautioned, "You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." This reality exists because the values of the world, the pursuits of the world and the spirit of the world are opposed

to God. This refers to the world as a system that is opposed to God. It is not a reference to all the inhabitants of the world because there are people living in the world who submit to God and His ways. The apostle John explained, "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world" (1 John 2: 16).

With regard to the people living in this world, the Scriptures tell us, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3: 16). Although God cannot develop a deep friendship of purity of heart with the sinful people of the world - indeed, He is angry with all expressions of sin - He loves us and extends His helping hand of friendship of concern to us, to rescue us and exhort us to change our moral character and our whole way of life, such that we can become true friends with Him. We must therefore forsake and reject the attractions of this world and the desires of the self-life so that we can develop quality of oneness with Him.

The Lord Jesus instructs us: "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it" (Matthew 7: 13, 14). It is also true that the higher the level of friendship we seek for, the less the number of people we will find who are willing to live by what is required for this kind of friendship. As such, we may at times feel lonely and wonder whether we should have remained where the majority are and have more friends. This is a choice that we must make: what level of quality do we want to pursue in life, what are we prepared to give ourselves for? There are not many people whom the Lord can meaningfully trust, and entrust to them what is most important and what is most precious in His heart.

When our friendship with the Lord reaches a higher level, we will also be able to develop a similar friendship with those who genuinely pursue the path of purity of heart. We will also be able to love others with a pure unselfish love and to offer the friendship of concern to others who may benefit from our love and help, not seeking for anything for ourselves in

return, but to care because we genuinely love. It is this kind of love and friendship that can meaningfully influence others to choose the path of submission to God that leads to true friendship with Him.