

Making friends

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Why should we make friends? When we experience pain and disappointment with our friends, we may often wonder whether it is worthwhile to have friends. Would it not be better for us to keep our distance so that we will not be hurt? We may not want to be hermits staying on a mountain, but perhaps we could just isolate ourselves, live in our own world, doing our own things, and protect ourselves from the pain that others may bring to us?

Indeed, the book of Proverbs, in the Scriptures, tells us, "A man of *many friends comes to ruin*" (Proverbs 18: 24). This may seem to confirm our fear that friends may bring misery to our lives. It is indeed true that friends may bring misery to our lives, and many have become disillusioned with life because of what they have experienced in their relationship with "friends". This occurs especially readily in situations of friendship of exploitation, when what may seem to be a meaningful friendship may in reality be based on personal gain. However, the same verse in Proverbs also says, "But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." In times of great need and when life seems unbearable, we may also have experienced the love, the concern, the support and the help of friends who have genuinely cared for us, including those who have quietly prayed for us, who are not seeking for personal gain.

How then should we approach the issue of friendship? Should we have friends? Is there a way in which we can develop friendships that are helpful for our lives and avoid friendships that may bring ruin to us?

There are three main reasons that I am aware of that may lead to discouragement and misery in friendship. The first reason is the spirit with which we seek to develop friendships. The second is the wholesomeness of our understanding, and consciousness of, the different categories of friendship. The third reason is the degree of carefulness and prayerfulness in developing friendships. Let us consider these three reasons more fully.

What is the spirit with which we seek to develop friendships?

For many people, friendship is viewed primarily from the perspective of what they want and what they need. We make friends because we want to have people to care for us, to help us, when we are in difficulties. We expect sympathy, understanding and encouragement when we are burdened with the cares of life, while we may also be willing to show sympathy and care when we are able to do so. This is the friendship of mutual benefit, with varying degrees of giving and receiving. When we approach friendship in this way, there are likely to be moments when we are very happy because there is mutual encouragement and help, when we find the meaningfulness of giving as well as receiving. However, there may also readily occur situations when, arising from the failure of a friend, or misinterpretation of a situation, a sense of discouragement may set in, which may at times become very pronounced.

If we want to correct this problem, we must change the spirit with which we develop friendships. We should learn from God, who is the best friend that we could ever have, and who is never discouraged no matter how we respond to him, no matter how we may fail Him. Of

course, He is sad when our lives are not positive and He may weep for us, as the Lord Jesus wept for Jerusalem. However, He is never adversely affected because His approach to friendship is one of self-giving and not self-seeking, even though He also deeply appreciates positive response from those whom He loves.

The apostle Paul tells us, "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5: 6-8). As we respond to His friendship and grow in the quality of our being, the friendship of concern that God extends to us can blossom into the friendship of purity of heart. At the same time, God is patient and understanding as well as discerning, and He will relate with us according to the meaning within our heart, without being negatively affected by our negative responses.

We may protest that we are not like God in His moral perfection, and so we are not able to love with that kind of love. We may say, "We are weak, we need help and we look for help; hence we may be discouraged when the help does not come."

God is constantly calling us to a higher plane of living, to be like Him in His moral character (though not with His absolute moral perfection but within our limitations) and He wants to help us to grow in that direction. The apostle Peter exhorts us on behalf of God, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts *which were yours* in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all *your* behavior; because it is written, "YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY" (1 Peter 1: 14-16). However, if we do not yet live at that plane, it should help us recognize the need to give room for

situations of failure on the part of others, just as we recognize that we also fail and may bring pain and discouragement to others – we also expect them to be understanding towards us, do we not? As we steadily grow to be like the Lord Jesus in His character, we will discover that our approach to friendship will become more meaningful and edifying.

The second reason that may lead to discouragement and misery in friendship is the lack of wholesomeness in our understanding, and lack of consciousness of, the different [categories of friendship](#). If we do not differentiate between the different categories of friendship when we relate with others, we may be easily disappointed and confused and it may hinder the development of meaningful friendships.

On our part, we must take care that we do not seek to develop the friendship of exploitation, being preoccupied with what we can benefit from the "friend", without due regard for his welfare. We should also guard against those who seek to exploit us for their own ends when they seek to cultivate such a friendship with us, knowing that this can lead to disaster in our lives. It is easy to have many "friends" when what we possess is appealing to others who want what we have, who may also desert us when they have obtained what they want. Proverbs 19: 4 tells us, "Wealth adds many friends, but a poor man is separated from his friend." This applies not only to wealth and material possessions, but also to our abilities, our talents, our physical attractiveness, our status and our influence.

However, though we may be conscious of the wrong attitudes and values that may be present in others, we can still meaningfully extend the friendship of concern to others who may benefit from our lives. In such a situation, there is a need to be sensitive to the Lord's guidance and to recognize our own limitations at our stage of development, so that we do not unwisely embark on something beyond our ability to

cope with positively. When we recognize that this is the category of friendship in that situation, we may more readily maintain a healthy sense of detachment. This will help us not to be adversely affected when the response is negative, as our primary purpose is to be helpful where we can, yet knowing that others have the freedom and responsibility to make their own choices.

When we find it appropriate and meaningful to develop a friendship of purity of heart, we have come to appreciate the richness of fellowship that can exist when there is oneness of heart in the context of the pursuit of holiness in the Lord. In such a friendship, the concentration is not on what we can receive but on what we ought to be, and friendship is cultivated because of the oneness of direction of heart. In such a relationship, we do not demand from others what we want for our own benefit, but we encourage one another in the path of holiness. At the same time, we also learn to discern and recognize the reality of different levels of friendship, which depend on the degree of quality of heart. While we seek to be considerate towards others in their failures and deficiency, we are also conscious that the meaningfulness of the friendship is dependent on the moral choices being made. As such, we are not discouraged when failures occur, but we seek to be faithful in fulfilling our part. This leads to tranquillity of heart in our relationships with others.

The third reason that may lead to discouragement in friendship is the degree of carefulness and prayerfulness in developing friendships. When we are self-confident or careless in developing friendships, it is easy to enter into relationships that may bring temporary pleasantness but long-term distress, which may lead to disappointment and discouragement. Even though we may be generally positive in spirit and we are conscious of different categories of friendship, we may still

be caught off-guard and become entangled in unhelpful and negative relationships.

It is important that we seek the Lord prayerfully for wisdom in developing friendships, looking to Him for His guidance and enabling in all our relationships. If we do so, we may be able to nurture worthwhile and meaningful friendships. Ultimately, our priority must be to cultivate a deep friendship of purity of heart with the Lord Himself, learning to move on to higher and [higher levels of friendship](#) with Him, and hence also with others who are doing likewise.