

Spiritual Friendship James Shepherd

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[0 : 00] We live in a society today that has never been more connected than ever. In the palm of my hands, I have access to over a thousand of my friends on Facebook and hundreds of followers on Instagram.

And yet the repetitive conclusion from all of this that we keep hearing from experts and doctors and psychologists is that we are more than ever now lonely. We've never been more lonely in the history of man than today.

In all our technological advancement, to become more connected with the world around us, we've become less lonely. With all this technological power at our disposal for making friends, we are growing in our struggle to actually make deep and meaningful, intimate friendships.

Why? I think there are a number of contributing factors to this going on in our world, but there are two main ones. Firstly, a growing individualism. As a society, we've grown more and more individualistic and autonomous in the way we interact with the world.

Once upon a time, we had much more value in community itself. Taking part in community life was important. Volunteering for your local club was important.

[1 : 13] Volunteering to ref or to help out at a weekend sport was seen as important as we engaged in the community. And as we did engage in the community, as we settled down into a community and planted roots, we allowed our friendships to flourish as we stayed and lingered.

However, sometime now, this communal culture has shifted and slowly faded out to replace a more individualistic culture. Most clubs, sports clubs particularly, are struggling to get volunteers now to help run sports on the weekends.

And technology has allowed people to be more and more mobile these days. People, or young people like myself, are refusing to settle down in one place and desiring to move on, to look and step to travel and to explore, to go where they desire to go.

There is a culture now of not wanting to settle down and invest in one place, but rather to go from place to place where it suits the person. They take new jobs in new places, in new cities, in new countries even.

And so the generations rising up are the ones now who have money and truly the opportunity to go wherever they want to. The world is their oyster. And because of such, they are growing more and more individualistic.

[2 : 32] But at what cost is this? Friendship, for them, is no more than circumstance and interest, momentary. And it's rarely given a chance to flourish, as when their circumstance changes, their friendships have to change also.

And so whilst many young people enjoy an opportunity to go travel, to work in different places, to work in different cities and countries, they suffer as they lose their substantial and deep connections with their friends.

That's the first one. And secondly, the romanticising of sexually committed relationships. As a teenager growing up, there are countless of teen dramas on TV every single night.

Shows like The O.C., One Tree Hill, Gossip Girl, shows that your kids might have watched growing up. For those of you who are a little bit older than I am, there are shows like Degrassi High, Beverly Hills, 90210.

And if you're a fan of the ABC, there was a show called Heartbreak High on television that you might have watched. Many of these shows have one underlying theme in them that dominated the whole story, and that was relationships.

[3 : 47] Whether sexual, friendship, or family, most of these stories follow the lives of young, attractive people as they worked through the different complexities of teenage relationships.

With the story being developed around one particular relationship, one that was sexual and romantic in nature, and the journey us viewers would go on was to see whether or not this relationship would make it.

It would last. Would they live happily ever after? Would it end in disaster? Why are we often so drawn in to these shows?

There's so many of these kinds of shows. They all have the same type of storyline, the same theme, and yet they're so popular. Why are we so drawn in to the tumultuous love story of Ryan and Marissa in *The O.C.*?

What is it about Dan and Serena or Chuck and Blair in *Gossip Girl* that keeps us watching? These shows, they target something that we desperately all want for ourselves, and that's to be loved, to enjoy intimacy, to enjoy companionship, to have a satisfying, special relationship that lasts.

[4 : 59] And shows like this, constantly bombarded by these shows like this, would have us believe that this type of intimacy, this type of love, can only be found in those romantic, sexually committed relationships.

This ideal is perpetuated by not just our fictional TV shows, but our reality ones as well. As you all know, there are shows like *The Bachelor* out there, *Married at First Sight*, *Farmer Wants a Wife*. These shows perpetuate this ideal romantic relationship to us. And so constant exposure to all of these is enough to make you think that the most fulfilling relationship you could be in is a committed sexual relationship.

Friendship, then, is just reduced to a second-class form of relationship that can't be as fulfilling as things like marriage or sexual committed relationships.

And these contributing factors affect friendship in two different ways. You see, individualism has removed the space for friendship altogether and therefore for friendship to flourish and become deep and meaningful for people.

[6 : 09] And the romanticization of sexual relationships, things like marriage as well, has removed altogether the value and the benefits of friendship as a place to find intimacy and love.

Therefore, in our society today, friendship has a second-class status. It's not viewed very highly. It's viewed as something that comes and goes by circumstance and interest.

And if you're lucky to find a best friend for life, then you're truly, truly lucky. However, the Bible paints a very high view of the picture of friendship, having a very, very high view indeed, so much so that at the heart of the gospel is the restoration of our friendship with God.

As Jesus says in John 15, 15, And so as we look at this topic of spiritual friendship, I want to discuss the difference the gospel makes in our lives, how the gospel shapes our friendships that we make together here.

That friendship does not have to be some sort of second-class relationship. But we can have truly satisfying, deep and meaningful, intimate friendships with each other because of Jesus and what he's done for us here.

[7 : 36] And so firstly, we need to just deconstruct the myth that friendship is a second-class relationship that lacks intimacy and satisfaction. So if your Bible's open, we're going to stay in 1 Samuel.

We're going to look at the example of Jonathan and David and an example of true friendship and deep and meaningful, satisfying friendship. So we are first introduced to David and Jonathan as friends back in chapter 18, straight after David killed Goliath, the hero of the Palestinian army. And verse 1 of 18 shows that Jonathan's response to David was incredible. After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David and he loved him as himself.

As far as we are aware, Jonathan hadn't even met David just yet, but he's already so impressed by what David has done by killing the giant Goliath that he already feels an affinity with David himself. And then in verse 3, he comes to David and makes a covenant with him. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic and even his sword, his bow and his belt.

[8 : 53] This scene might seem quite strange to you. Undressing yourself is probably not the first thing you would do when you made a friend. You don't just go, here's my shirt, here's my pants.

You wouldn't just do that. That's kind of strange. But let's not get too distracted here by our own modern day culture. The scene plays out before us as an incredible demonstration of Jonathan's devotion and love to David.

By taking off his royal robes and placing them on David, by giving him his sword and his bow, his belt, he's not merely signifying his gratitude and generosity towards David for what he has done, but he is signifying his allegiance to him, showing that he was willing to give everything to him, including his right to the throne.

In David, Jonathan saw one in whom he could follow and serve and love as his friend and king.

Later on, this allegiance will be tested in chapter 20.

In this chapter, David feels that his life is in danger. He feels King Saul, Jonathan's father, seeks to kill him, and he goes to Jonathan with all this, knowing that Saul is quite well aware of their friendship.

[10:13] He goes to Jonathan and says, what's going to happen? Why would this happen? Here, Jonathan's love and faithfulness is put to the test. Here, their friendship is truly put on the line.

What will he decide to do? To side with his father, the king, or to side with his friend, David, servant of the king? And after dining with his father and discovering his shameful hatred that he had for David, he chose his friend.

Verse 42, Jonathan said to David, go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the Lord, saying, Jonathan's witness between you and me, between your descendants and my descendants forever.

Jonathan remembered and kept his covenant with David that he would be his friend and he would seek to preserve his life and ensure his well-being. Jonathan did this at the cost of his own well-being and the throne of Israel itself.

He fulfilled the promises he had given to David, that he would protect him and look after him, that he wouldn't forsake him. When Jonathan died in battle, David mourned him, saying this in 2 Samuel 1:26, I grieve for you, Jonathan, my brother.

[11:37] You were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women. This is not to be confused as a sexual kind of love, as some have done.

No, this is a deep, intimate love of a friend who gave his all for David. The friendship that David had with Jonathan was more satisfying than the love of any woman.

It had a physical nature to it as well, back in chapter 20, verse 41, where it's recorded that they were kissing each other, embracing each other.

And it's easy for us to read this and confuse it with a romantic idea of kissing and embracing. But then we would be missing what was really going on here. After being tested and tempted to pledge his allegiance to his father and king, he decided that he would instead pledge his allegiance to the future king.

The king that God had anointed. And he does this in the most obvious and expressive way, by kissing him. Fulfilling what we see in Psalm 2, verse 12, which says, serve the Lord with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling.

[12:49] Kiss the son, his son, or he'll be angry. Son, in the Psalms, is often used the term to describe the Lord's anointed, the king of Israel.

And so Jonathan here is showing that he's not just merely pledging his allegiance to David, but to the God of Israel. He doesn't just merely kiss the son to show he is devoted, but showers him with kisses to show that he is not just his servant, but his friend, that he has great love and affection for. This kind of friendship wasn't uncommon or unique in ancient times. As Proverbs 18, 24 hints at, one who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

This is certainly true for David and Jonathan, perhaps true for some of you as well. As Katie and I prepare to get married, we are obviously looking at the guest list of who's going to come, who's not going to make it.

And obviously there are some family members that we have, as I'm sure you all know, that we would rather leave off the guest list because we've got other friends we want to bring to the reception itself.

[14:09] And so we have deeper connections and relations with our friends sometimes than our own family members, just like David and Jonathan had. Just because we might be related by blood doesn't mean we necessarily enjoy the same kind of deep relationship.

However, in our modern world we seem to think that marriage and what comes naturally after that, family, is the ideal place for finding fruitful, intimate, and fulfilling relationships.

But at least ever since the book of Proverbs and the example of Jonathan, family doesn't necessarily provide that for us. It's a myth that you can only find love and intimacy in a romantic sexual relationship and then in family.

Yet we are constantly told through all our media, through books, through movies, through whatnot, that we absorb each and every day that that is so. And we end up believing it.

Which leads us as Christians to idolise the idea of the married life, to dread the single life, but also to forget altogether the value and benefit of friendships.

[15:20] We need to deconstruct this myth. There is a way that we can pursue deep and meaningful friendships that are satisfying, that are there for us in times of need.

But what this looks like for us is the question. And how does the gospel shape our relationships is the other question. I think the key to the strength of David and Jonathan's friendship was that they placed at the centre, was what they placed at the centre of their relationship.

And for us, that is the key as well. If you take a moment to think of your own friends and your own life around you, think, how did I become friends of these people right now?

How did I meet them? And why are we your friends? What brought us together? Most of the time it's going to be because of a particular circumstance that brought you together. You've got your work friends that you met at work, your school friends you met at school, your church friends you met at church, your friends at mother group that you met at mother group.

These places are the places which we make friends. And then, as you interact with all these different people in these places, you work out the people you want to be friends with based off the similar interests you have with them, you have conversations with these people and there are moments of affinity with them.

[16:43] As you say, you watch The Bachelor, so do I. Let's be friends. You follow the swans and you're grieving too? Yes, who am I? Let's be friends.

You like travelling? You like doing that too? So do I. Let's be friends. C.S. Lewis puts it like this. Friendship is born at the moment when one man says to another, what, you too?

I thought that no one but myself something. Friendship is something we enter into freely with one another when we find some affinity with the other person.

I remember having this exact experience at 21st, like just like this. I semi-crashed this 21st and the person I had met was this, he's his girlfriend's 21st.

And we're on the dance floor having a great time and we just had this moment where we realised we like the same music, we like the same hobbies, we like the same kind of clothing brands. We had this incredible moment where we just enjoyed each other's hobbies and we became straight away best friends.

[17:55] And that sparked this friendship. We actually are quite good at establishing friendships with people. All you need is a particular circumstance and a particular interest and straight away you can get a friendship going.

But the problem is that we aren't very good at keeping friends. And the reason is because most of our friendships fail to be any deeper than the circumstances and the interests that we have.

We rely upon them too much to hold it all together but the reality is things change over time.

Interests change or we change locations and then all of a sudden our friendships also change.

Danny Hoon a friend of mine back in high school we were in the same tutor group or home group you might call it in the same social group as well we caught the same bus together and we saw each other a lot throughout high school.

We would hang out every single day. We would go to Macca's during lunchtime and sneak off in our car. After school we would go to Castle Towers and eat Pizza Hut together.

[19:05] We would hang out every single day together five days a week at school. It's been eight years now since I've finished high school and I've not seen him since. I've even heard from him. I have no idea what he's doing in his life and how he's going.

Like that a solid friendship was dismantled and gone because the circumstances were taken away and the interests were not able to flourish anymore.

And this is the sad reality we all live in. We base our friendships around the convenient circumstances we all live in. We struggle to stay connected with people as friends when those circumstances change.

So it's no wonder why the world views friendship as a second class relationship. It seems it's not the same as marriage which has a longevity and a commitment to it and therefore it can't be as satisfying for feeling as marriage or romantic sexual relationships.

But as we've seen in the Bible friendship has an incredibly high status friends. The Bible holds in high regard friends. And it's a part of our being.

[20 : 15] Known down in Genesis 1. Man was not meant to live alone. God made us to live in friendship. Part of living in the good order of creation part of what our design is is to be friends at the heart of it.

Not just friends with God but friends of each other. The gospel story not only unites us to God through Jesus' death and resurrection but unites us to each other as well. And so how can we then have satisfying intimate relationships, friendships of each other?

The gospel I think removes the circumstances and interest as the things that hold our friendships together and replaces these things with Christ himself in the centre.

Christ becomes the person we anchor our relationship in and by doing so the friendship is given a purpose that is based in eternity.

It firstly removes the circumstance from the equation because the place in which our relationship grows and matures is in Christ as Ephesians 2.13 reminds us. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

[21 : 35] The way in which God has reconciled us to each other is by drawing us together in Christ. Not in our workplace, not in our mother's groups, not in our AFL football clubs that we are a part of, but in Christ.

It's in him that we as believers enjoy a place for our friendship to flourish. A place that will not fade away or change, a place that we cannot escape from no matter how far we might travel, a strong foundation for our friendships themselves.

It also removes interest from the equation because we are not drawn together because of the common interest we all have in something, but we are drawn together because of the common faith we express.

Ephesians 4 4 reminds us this, there is one body and one spirit just as you were called to one hope when you were called. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father over all who is over all and through all and in all.

We are not like a football club. We haven't all come here together because we like the same AFL team. I think that's pretty obvious. Not even our love for waking up early on Sunday morning.

[22 : 55] to sing and to read and to hear some guy preach and to do this thing called church. No, it's in the fact that God has drawn us together in Christ and that we share this same experience of being saved and being known by God and that's why we've come together because God has actually brought us here together.

We're all very different people. We all come from different places, different backgrounds, different interests, and yet we're all here together. that's a miracle. None of you would be here right now if it weren't for Christ and for him drawing you in.

This is why we wake up early to come to church. This is why I can be friends with Sam who supports GWS. Because we are in Christ.

Christ is the place in which our friendships flourish, removing circumstance. And Christ is the person that draws us together, removing interests from the equation.

And because he is such, it means our friendships can have an eternal purpose. And what is that purpose? It's a mutual desire for one other to see each other, our friends, grow in maturity in Christ.

[24 : 14] To help them continue on the journey of faith. As Hebrews 10 reminds us, to spur each other on towards love and good deeds all the more as we see the day approaching.

Our goal for our friendships, our Christian spiritual friendships, is to see each other get to the end. As we run the race together, we serve each other, we pray for each other, we read the words together with each other, because we want to see our friends make it.

When we allow our friendships to be dictated by the world, to allow our interests and our circumstances to be the main things as to what holds our friendships together, we won't only just become lonely, but we'll also be tempted to turn our friendships into rivals as well.

being filled with envy or jealousy, looking at our friends becoming rivals. But when we anchor our friendships around God in Christ, the character of friendship changes to be more about serving the

other person, that is, about gaining from them, to help them run the race of life well. This is exactly the kind of relationship Jonathan and David had. They had at the centre of their friendship a desire to honour and to serve God above all else, which is why Jonathan was not tempted to become David's rival.

[25 : 47] He was not tempted to actually in the end support his own father who was wrong, but he desired what was good and what was right and proper, and that was to serve David and to serve God as his king.

In the same way, as we seek to befriend one another, our desire for doing so, it's not because we have the same interests, although that might be the case. It's not because we're in the same place all the time, although right now we are in the same place.

These things are helpful, but the ground for which our friendships always hold together is Christ. The purpose for its longevity is always Christ.

And when we practise friendship in such a way, that's when we enter into what is the most satisfying and fulfilling forms of relationship, the spiritual friendship. As Christians, we practise the art of spiritual friendship for the sake of spurring each other on towards love and good deeds, towards helping each other seek to glorify and to make God look great.

That is the ultimate purpose of our life, to live and to love God, and that's the purpose of our friendships, to help make that flourish and easy in some way.

[27 : 09] To be there when it's difficult and to be there when it's good. To continue to draw our eyes back to God in both those times. That we might all reach the goal of being with him and with each other in the new creation.

When that is the goal of our friendships, it will allow the space for being loved and cared for, vulnerable and helped, satisfied and fulfilled as we seek in Christ not only one's present good, but also one's eternal good.

Amen. Indeed. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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