Spiritual Friendship

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[0:00] welcome to St Paul's. Let me add my welcome to those of Nick's and others. My name's Steve. I've never met you before. I'm the lead pastor here at St Paul's and we're, as Nick has indicated, we are partway through our vision series. So we've got the St Paul's app. If you want to jump online, there's an outline for today's message and also keep your Bibles open there in Galatians 5. I'm focusing more on 6 in this message today. Loneliness and actual isolation have become a real epidemic in the 21st century. They were certainly concerns before the arrival of COVID-19 and the lockdowns around that, but they have certainly, these issues have been exacerbated since COVID-19. Social isolation and loneliness are among the many factors that are known to be detrimental for a person's well-being, sense of well-being. They are in fact known to be harmful for not just mental health, but also for physical health as well. And the irony of all that is that we are apparently more connected than we've ever been in any history in the world, any time in history. Connected via the internet and social media, and yet more socially isolated and lonely. Every time there's a census, these numbers continue to rise. And of course, the increase of wealth in general has not in any way matched with an increase in personal happiness.

The sad reality of our lives is that as we have been speeding up and speeding up and speeding up, for many of us, our friendships and our connections, personal relationships, have not been able to keep pace with that. And the amazing bit in all this is the largest group that is experiencing social isolation and loneliness in our city are those between 15 and 24 years of age. You know, the ones who are constantly on social media, who have got more friends on social media than, well, I do. As of 2022, 17% of males and 15% of females aged between 15 and 24 were experiencing loneliness and isolation. That's the group that we call next gen, the next generation here, the youth and young adults of this church. If this is a sad aspect of modern life in general, it is even sadder for Christians.

Christians. We need each other in order to grow into what God has saved us for. So one of the things I've been saying throughout this series is that there is often a gap between the great truths of the Christian faith and what they declare and the lives that such great truths should produce. There's often a gap.

That is, we can believe great things, but our character and our priorities are no different from those who don't believe those great things. And what we need is grace-fuelled rhythms, which is what this series is about. We need spiritual disciplines. We need holy habits. Christian practices to push those truths down from the mind into the heart in such a way that we approach our lives and the world and society entirely differently. And this is why I think friendship is a spiritual discipline more than just a helpful idea to guard your mental health and your physical health. It is a godly habit as well as a good habit in which we sharpen each other's thinking, harden one another's resolve to continue to follow Christ and soften one another's heart to God's word and his will for our lives. So I've got three points on the screen. This is going to be the journey for us today. First of all, made for relationships.

[4:44] The primary reason why spiritual friendship is a Christian discipline is that we need in order to become all that God has called us to in Jesus is that we were actually created for relationship.

That is, it's in our very DNA. It's part of our design. And now I preached a sermon about this last year in Genesis. So because you're all familiar with that joke. I won't go over it all. But you can go back to that in Genesis last year and have a read of that. It's called Created for Relationship, I think. I mean, it's pretty, anyway. The quick summary of it is that on page two of the Bible, it says, in all the creation accounts, the only time where God creates and he says it is not good is in the creation of humanity and with Adam being alone. Genesis 2.25 is the only place where God says something that he's made is described as not good. That is, there's something not good about Adam.

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It's not that he's got a design flaw. God did not make a mistake. Adam is in paradise. He is in perfection. And yet there is still something missing. The missing piece is that we as humanity is made in the image of a God who is an us, not a me. Adam was made in the image of an eternal community, the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons in one. Saint Augustine said that the Trinity is the only version of God and ultimate reality in any religion or philosophical system that has personal relationship at its very heart. Only the God of Christianity is himself a community. God is a self-sufficient, self-sustaining community. Three persons delighting in each other and loving each other and serving each other in absolute perfect unity so that they move as one and yet distinctively three. Only in the Trinity do we see that personal relationship is primary, not secondary. [7:25] They, personal relationship is not a means to an end. They are at the very center of reality and of life. And I mentioned back, you probably won't need to go and watch it now, but I mentioned back then there are three broad categories of relationships.

We need deep relationship with God. We need deep relationship with another human being and we need deep relationship with people who are different than us.
That is, we cannot grow to be like the God in whose image we are made without community. We cannot be wiser, more loving, courageous, more joyful, stable without the community of God and his people collectively moving in obedience to the God in whose image we are made.
We need that together.
We love to guard our privacy. We like to hold commitment to any groups at an arm's length. We prefer relationships that don't challenge us, that don't stretch us, that don't cost us too much. [9:03] That's our preference. In fact, I've recently read one sociologist said the only relationship that is left in modern Western society that is not transactional in that you are stuck with it legally and emotionally is parenting.

And he said, that's why so many people are choosing to have dogs rather than kids. You know, your dog eats your best pair of shoes and you can just take it to the vet.
Like literally, I mean, it just transactional. Every other relationship is transactional except parenting. You're stuck with it. We prefer relationships that don't challenge us or stretch us too much.
And so we stay spiritually, emotionally and relationally immature. And what's interesting is that in ancient times, friendship was regarded as the most virtuous of all relationships.
In our modern age, we regard our sexual relationships as the most virtuous of all relationships. Our identity is attached to sexuality.
[10:18] In ancient times, it's an entirely different thing. Friendship, the greatest in the sense that you have family relationships whether you like it or not.

Like you don't choose that. You don't choose who your family is. It just happens to you. Even in modern times, we would say that we fell in love.
It's kind of something that happened to us rather than something that we might have wanted it, but it just could have happened to us. In ancient times, there was a range of marriages.
It wasn't something that it just happened to you. And so they regarded that friendship was the greatest, the most virtuous. Because it doesn't happen unless you intentionally work at it.
And in that sense, they thought it was the most virtuous of relationships because it was the relationship you had to work at. The practice of friendship for the Christian is something that they extend to the whole Christian community.
[11:27] Now, of course, there are all kinds of levels of intensity to it. You know, Jesus had the crowds of people who followed him. He had his 12 disciples who he chose who were with him at every moment.

And there were those who were particularly close to him. Even there's Peter, James and John. He's three best mates, if you like. But John was his bestest of his best mates.
Read John's gospel. The disciple whom Jesus loved. He's referring to himself. Don't know what the rest of them thought about that when that was published. But, you know. But despite the practice of friendship being more intense with some, we are to practice the discipline of friendship with all Christians in our church community.
Because that's what we were created for, but it's also what we were saved for, which is my next point. Now, Galatians 6, which Merle just read out to us, doesn't actually use the word friendship. But it does talk about the characteristics of Christian community and Christian relationship and Christian friendship. And it gives us two main qualities of spiritual friendship that we are called to

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practice as a Christian community.
[12:40] And they are dependability and transparency. So, first of all, dependability. A friend is someone who is always there for you.

Galatians 6.2 says, Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. Now, if we see someone carrying a heavy load, you know, arms full of shopping, out of the boot of the car, into the house, the way that we assist them in carrying their load is not to, let me pray for you, that you would have the strength and the energy to get that onto the kitchen bench.
I mean, that might be a contribution. But that's not enough, is it? The load has to transfer, some of the load has to transfer from them onto you to carry the burden.
Is that correct? The burden has to shift. You have to take some of the load. Just praying for them, helpful. Once you've done that, then get the burden and carry it.
If we take the time to listen to a person with an emotional burden, going again and again and again, we will be drained, for instance.
[14:07] What that happens is, someone with an emotional burden that you are taking the time to engage with and listen to and listen to and be with and be with, what ultimately happens is, some of their emotional burden drops onto you in such a way that you become drained yourself.

Drained. We lose some of our own emotional resources in order for their emotional resource to be lifted. Some of their suffering slides across onto us.
We are bearing some of their burden. It's the same with financial burdens. If someone has a financial burden, there is absolutely no way of bearing some of their burden without losing some of our financial resources.
There's no other way. The burden can't be lifted up without the other losing some of their resources. And the great Jonathan Edwards said that in one of his sermons, if we love to help them, if our statement is, I would so love to help them, but frankly, I can't afford it.
What we're actually saying is, I can't help them without burdening myself. And you say, well, that's exactly the point of radical generosity. You ought to be burdened.
[15:34] That's the point. And that is exactly what Galatians 6.2 is calling the Christian community to. To be a dependable friend is to allow some of the burden, the suffering of others, to slide across onto us.

A true friend will stay beside you and allow some of your suffering to slide across onto them. If they don't do that, if they don't do that, they may be an acquaintance.
They may be a sibling. They may even be a spouse. But they're not a friend. Proverbs 18.24 says, One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.
That is, it's possible to have siblings, parents, a spouse, who is not a true friend. Don't get me wrong.
They're still your brother. They're still your sister. They're still your parents. They're still your spouse. But if they don't stick with you in the depths of a burden and carry some of that burden themselves, then they're not a true friend.
[16:59] And you can see why the ancients thought that friendship was the most virtuous. Because a friend is always there, dependable, carrying the burdens.

So the first essence of friendship is one who sticks with the other through thick and thin. A true friend is always dependable. The second one, second essence of true spiritual friendship is transparency or it's vulnerability.
Now, what we have here, these are not words that are really used, transparency not used or vulnerability not used in Galatians. But what we have here is, if you like, a case study of the transparent spiritual friendship in Galatians 6.
Verse 1. Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently, but watch yourselves or you also may be tempted.
So verse 1 describes a scenario where a member of this Christian community amongst the Galatians is caught in a sin.
[18:10] Now, this verse is not saying, let me just put a caveat here. This verse is not saying that as a Christian, you have a responsibility, you are commanded to point out to everyone where they are wronging, where they are flawed, where they are failing, where they are sinning.

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Like, that's not what this passage is saying at all. And there is a lot of ways in the New Testament where we are instructed not to be quick to criticise, where we're instructed that love looks many falls and failings in one another.
1 Peter 4, 8, 1 Corinthians 13, 5, and 13, 7, for instance. This is quite specific. It says that caught in a sin.
Now, that statement there indicates that this particular sin is a behavioural pattern. It means that this particular sin has got the upper hand of the person.
When it says caught in a sin, it doesn't mean you've opened the doors. Ah, I've caught you. It means the person themselves is trapped in a sin. They're the ones who are caught.
[19:34] Not that you've caught them, but they themselves are caught. It's a behavioural pattern over and over and over again. It's a habit of sinful behaviour that the Christian is not able to overcome without the help of others.

They're trapped. And in that sense, this particular sin is therefore harming them. And because it's harming them, it's harming other relationships that they are part of.
So the spiritual friend is neither quick to criticise nor are they afraid to confront. Notice who Paul says is the spiritual friend here.
Brothers and sisters, you who live by the Spirit. This is not an instruction that Paul says, hey, by the way, the pastors of Galatians or the wardens or the parish council or just the community group leaders of the Galatian church.
It's not some special group of Christians. It's not just the leaders. This is instruction to the brothers and this is all the Christian community. This is your all responsibility.
[20:53] And what he's saying is to be a true spiritual friend in that moment with someone who's caught in a sin, habitual behaviours, you come in to restore gently.

The word for restore in the original New Testament language here means to set back in place a dislocated bone joint.
You know, you've seen the, you know, you've got to yank it into place and nowadays you get those green whistle things and you go off into la-la land and, you know, doctors get their legs in and, you know, I think that's how they do it.
I mean, according to Operation Ouch anyway. What that means is there's something dislocated, there's something out of place, there's something that needs to be put right and to put it right, you need to inflict some pain in order to bring healing.
That is, the pain is a healing pain that needs to be brought in. The confrontation over the sin will most likely be painful but its goal is to bring a change of heart and life and healing.
[22:13] That's the goal. And so, therefore, the true spiritual friend will be gentle. The goal is to win over for healing.

The key to ensuring that there is gentleness is in the last sentence of verse one. Watch yourselves or you also may be tempted.
We can never be a gentle, spiritual friend with the goal of healing if we are tempted, is what it's saying.
If we are tempted, primarily, here to be proud. Tempted to take the high moral ground over someone who has got the dislocated joint.
Someone caught in the sin. Tempted to think that I'm not, I would not, I would never do that. Tempted to think that I'm not capable of a similar sin or even an equal sin.
[23:27] Tempted to think that I don't have any dislocated joints myself. If we ever feel that we are above the person morally, our air of superiority will most certainly come through and we will destroy not restore.

Another way of putting that is to restore humbly. In other words, the instruction here is the same as Jesus. Be more mindful of the log in your own eye than the speck in the other.
So the spiritual friend is not afraid to confront but they also don't enjoy it either. This spiritual friendship is so essential for personal transformation.
We cannot change for good into the image of God without spiritual friends. And spiritual friendship is so hard and it is very difficult because it might not work.
The other person might turn on you and not like you or they may even want to hurt you. And that's the danger.
[24:49] scarier. But what is even scarier is that it might actually work. It might actually work.

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You see, when we are spiritual friends to others, we are giving them permission to be a spiritual friend back to us. And I wonder if the reason we might give permission for or we justify so much or we ignore so much or we overlook the sin and the unrighteousness of others in the Christian community so much is mostly to do with us, not with them.
It's mostly to do with we actually don't want that level of accountability for ourselves because it's painful. A true spiritual friend always lets you in and doesn't let you down.
vulnerability, transparency, reliability, dependability, sticking closer than even family. Now, frankly, that's the kind of friendship we all need.
But the problem with it is is that we have hearts that are so deeply flawed, flawed, insecure, and uncertain of ourselves, it's always very hard for us to reach out to others and start that friendship cycle.
[26:29] Our natural self is, in fact, afraid of this level of transparency. We've all got images to maintain, egos to protect.

Our natural self is also selfish because we have been taught for many decades in our society that you are the most important person in the world.
world. And the way to discover yourself is to look inside yourself, truly you. Our natural selves are afraid of transparency and our natural self is selfish because we don't want to have to give that level of dependability to someone else.
So we don't like dependability and transparency. The transparency and the vulnerability are unsettling, the dependability is onerous, too scared and too selfish to be a true spiritual friend.
Much easier to have hundreds of Facebook friends, hundreds of Facebook friends that you can pause actually for 30 days if you so choose or unfollow or just send an emoji when they're having a rough patch.
[27:50] Much easier. chapter 5 verse 26 refers to our heart issues. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

The word conceit there means to be hungry for glory. It means I'm always hungry for glory because I have such a deep, deep need for affirmation and approval.
That's what the word conceit means. So if a person who is insecure and unsure of their own self worth, constantly needing approval and when it comes, that approval that comes is never enough, it's just a bottomless pit, then what that means is we tend to move out into our friendships and other relationships in two ways.
we provoke them, that is we lord it over them, or we envy them, which is to feel inferior to others. Exploiting and using others rather than being a true friend is all an attempt to fill that hole of the fragile identity.
[29:09] both of them are doing exactly the same thing. Can't do the criticism because the ego is too fragile, can't do the dependability because it doesn't fill up my ego, unless of course the ego that needs to be filled up is the affirmation that I need to receive from others that I am a true helper and a friend.

That is, you've got the idolatry of being a helper. In that case, if you have, if your affirmation is constantly coming from being that person who is always there, if that's your affirmation, then ultimately you are moving into the burden, not to lighten their burden, but to feel your sense of worthlessness.
It's you. It's about you. You're using the burden for your own glory. Now, this does not have to be the case for the Christian. verses 3 and 4, chapter 6, they are quite remarkable.
If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone without comparing themselves to anyone else.
See, I don't know, you put those two verses together, verse 1 says, the Christian is nothing. You think you're something when you're not? Christian is nothing.
[30:41] Verse 4, Paul calls them to be proud of themselves. I mean, what category do you put that in? The Christian knows that they are more sinful and unworthy than they ever imagined, and therefore transparency should not be a problem.

And at the same time, they are more loved and affirmed than they ever dreamed, and so defendability should not be a problem. our sinfulness humbles us out of selfishness, and God's approval of us in Jesus affirms us out of our fear of transparency.

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Then we can be a true spiritual friend. So, last point, empowered for spiritual friendship. Where do we get the power to be that kind of friend?
amongst our brothers and sisters here at St. Paul's in this Christian community? The answer is verse 2. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfil the law of Christ.
The reason we are commanded here to carry each other's burdens is because it fulfills the law of Christ. Now, the word law there means modelling our whole life on the example of Jesus Christ.
[32:05] Verse 2 reflects back into what Paul has already said in chapter 5, verses 13 and 14. You, my brothers and sisters, serve one another humbly in love, for the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command, love your neighbour as yourself.

God, the God, the Son, the one who existed in eternity in perfect relationship, in harmony, came into this world as a human being.
God, the God, the Son, the one who existed in eternity in perfect relationship, in harmony, came into this world as a human being and he didn't just come near to us.
He didn't just come in our orbit around us, he became one of us, one of us. and even more, he didn't just come along beside us to carry some of our burdens in allowing some of our sin and frailty and our failures and our flaws to come across onto him until we can pull ourselves together and move on with the burden.
He allowed the entire weight of the burden of all of humanity to slide across onto him. the only perfect human being.
[33:40] He took it all. He took the full weight of human sin and suffering upon the cross at Calvary. Isaiah 53 puts it like this.

He took up our pain and bore our suffering. He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was on him.
And by his wounds we have been healed. The major dislocation has been fixed through Jesus suffering the pain for us to put us right with God.
The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was the one who was crushed by the weight of the burden of human sin because of our rejection of our creator God.
God crushed himself with the burden that should be ours. Why? Because he's the ultimate friend.
[34:57] He has loved his neighbour. he has loved those who are unlovable. In John 15 Jesus says love each other as I have loved you.

Greater love has no one than this to lay down one's life for one's friends. And you are my friends. Not you are my followers.
Not you are my servants. Not you are my subjects. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master's business.
Instead I have called you friends. So love each other as I have loved you. How much more vulnerable can you get than being stripped naked in front of all of your followers all of your friends all of your families all of your village outside of a city of Jerusalem on a hill nailed to a cross for there is nothing hidden.
How much more dependable could someone be that they would rather die for your flaws for your failing for your sin for your selfishness for your pride than give up on you.
[36:37] You see when we see Jesus being that friend to us bearing our infinite burden then we can bear each other's finite burdens as true spiritual friends to one another.

So let me just say really briefly there is so much to unpack here. I want to say three things by implication.
I think there's only two in your notes. Very quickly number one which is not in your notes. If you're already in a community group and your community group is about information transfer and not about building connection with one another there's an imbalance that needs to shift.
I'll just leave that one there. Secondly, the second implication is our three vision series projects. Let me try to connect them to you a little bit in this.
We are raising money in this vision series to see our neighbours come to know the ultimate friend in Jesus. The ultimate friend who will never leave them, who will never abandon them, the one who truly loves their neighbour, an ultimate friend who will fill up every single longing of the heart.
[37:57] And we are seeking to do it in our church family home. We serve our community with this news from this base, our church family home, that needs its upgrades and its other maintenance issues to make it fit for a gathering point for connection and hospitality and dialogue and friendship

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for members of our community that are feeling a growing weight of isolation and loneliness.

And we're seeking to raise funds not just for those two things but with a particular focus on youth and young adults in our neighbourhood who are the most isolated and lonely in this day.
And so to use the words of Jesus if you like, give to these projects, give generously that you might win eternal friends for yourself.
The third implication is what is your personal next step. There is absolutely no such thing in the Bible, Old Testament and New that would in any way encourage, support, condone, isolated Christian faith.
It does not exist. It's a concept, a category that does not exist in Christianity. The main source of such spiritual friendships here at St.
[39:32] Paul's is our community groups. If you're not in one, I want to encourage you strongly to join one. And if you're already one, go back to my first point, what is your next step to take the relationships in that group to a deeper level?

What we're going to do now is we're going to participate together in the Lord's Supper. love to love to love to love to love to love to Jesus, our true and dependable friend who became vulnerable for us, for you.
And we're going to thank God and I encourage you to do this in a moment of reflection and quietness. Can I get my helpers to come and distribute now? In a moment of reflections and quietness, thank God for the spiritual friends that he has put in your life, including the ones in this church right now.
Because God has not just chosen us as his friends in Jesus, in terms of our relationship with him, he in his providence has chosen us to be friends in Jesus together right now in this day and age.
So that means that if your spiritual friends are primarily outside of this community, there's another imbalance that needs to be corrected. In the Lord's Supper, it is Jesus who has provided the feast and so we're reflecting on him.
[41:21] It is he who has provided the feast and this day in his providence, it is he who has chosen the guest list to enjoy it together.

So as we do this, let us not forget our host as we eat and drink with grateful hearts for the mercy of himself and the mercy of each other.
And as we do, may we also be reflecting and praying that we might become better friends of Jesus and that we might become better friends of Jesus together as we become better friends of each other.

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