

Time of Grace  
**Friend Request: Different Kinds of Friends**  
Mark 3:13-18, 5:37, 9:2, 14:32-33, John 13:22-24, Matthew 5:46-48  
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As a church, would you consider yourself to be close or cliquy? Because you all told me both.

Back in 2014, I came here to Appleton to be the pastor of this church and one of the first things on my agenda was to meet as many members of our church family as I could. And so for months and months and months, I set up every member visits, I got to go into your homes and living rooms, I got to know your families and your stories, your spiritual journeys, and I asked so many of you what your favorite part of our church was and if there's one thing you wish you could change about your church family, what it would be?

And what I remember from those conversations was this theme that came up again and again and again and again of how close so many of you felt to one another. Some of you just gushed about the community that you found here at our church.

But I found out after a few more visits that not everyone in the church was so gushy. There were some of you who cautiously and respectfully said, "You know, Pastor, sometimes I feel like our church can be a little, I don't know, cliquy?" And I would drive home in my car after those conversations and I would ask myself, "What's really going on at this place?" I mean, is there something exclusive and cliquy and sinful that I have to address as a pastor? And for years, I've been wrestling with those questions; trying to decide what's wise and what's not. What's biblical and what isn't? But just recently, I really feel like I put my finger on the heart of the issue. I think the heart of the issue, what causes so much drama and misunderstanding, is many Christians don't understand the difference between what the Bible calls friendship and what the Bible calls fellowship. And if you don't know how to define those two words and what they look like in practice, there's going to be misunderstandings, hurt feelings, missed blessings, and the church will be just like every other pick and choose place on planet earth.

I think about this quote from a man named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Ever heard that name before? He was a Lutheran pastor who actually tried to assassinate Hitler, which is pretty cool for a pastor to do. Many years ago, he said this. He said, "The one who wants more than what Christ has established does not want Christian brotherhood. He's looking for some extraordinary social experience which he has not found elsewhere."

Can you grasp what he's saying? He's saying if you walk into a church and you're just looking for some extraordinary social experience like, "Wow! This is so - I just made my first 10 best friends the first Sunday that I walked in through the door." He said wait, wait. Is that what Jesus commanded his church people to do? Is that what he established in the Christian church? That we all be best friends, stand up in each other's weddings, carry each other's caskets? Bonhoeffer

says if you expect the church to become like your personal season of friends, you might be disappointed when it doesn't happen.

On the other hand, author David Horne, who's written a really great Christian book on friendship and fellowship, he kind of counters with these words. He says, "The oft times freely swinging barn door of relationships," - how's that for a picture? "That we find in our churches today suggest that we might not fully take seriously the implications of the fact that Jesus' call to love one another is first and foremost a divine command." David Horn is asking, you know, why is it that some people come to a church and they leave as fast as they came? And they want to join the church and have a meeting with the pastor and they're really excited and then six months later, you wonder where they are? And they signed up for a Bible study and they get to the end of it and then they're gone. Why do people connect and disconnect so quickly? If the church is supposed to be different, why are the front doors like a barn door that's swinging back and forth, people come and people go and instead of finding something so powerful here that they just want to come and stay. He said maybe, just maybe, people who have made friends in the church have forgotten that there's something bigger at work here; a divine command from the Son of God himself to actually love one another.

And so that's the tension I want to explore with you today: What is friendship and what does it look like in the church? And what is fellowship? What can't we miss as we practice Christian love in the church? So if you're taking notes in your program, I'd love for you to write this down; that I want you to leave today with a clear understanding of the difference between friendship and fellowship. And if Jesus can teach us the difference between the two, we're going to be a stronger church and a stronger Christian community.

So let's start with Jesus and ask the question what would Jesus do? Or maybe a better question to ask is what did Jesus do? You might know, 2,000 years ago, Jesus, who is God, actually came down from heaven and walked on this earth for 33 years and he had interactions, conversations and relationships, with people. So what do those relationships look like? Well, let me show you by revealing my favorite friends, my Jesus - if you're a member of our church, you know that I love my Jesus action figures. Alright, so this is our Savior Jesus Christ. And you might know that when he started doing ministry and teaching it was so profound and it was so amazing, when he started doing miracles and turning water into wine and healing sick people and raising dead people, thousands and thousands of people flocked to him. And yet, Jesus didn't spend an equal amount of time with all the thousands. Instead, very early in his ministry, let me show you what happened in Mark 3. It says, "Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted and they came to him." These are the 12 he appointed. "Simon, (to whom he gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder)." I love that; that's like a WWE tag team wrestling name, isn't it? The Sons of Thunder! "Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him." Thousands of people listened to him, even hundreds of people said they believed in him, but Jesus chose to spend the vast majority of his time with these 12 that we call the apostles. And because Jesus is God and because God is good, it couldn't have been bad for Jesus to prefer some people more than others.

But then it gets really interesting because as you keep reading through Mark's gospel, you find out that Jesus actually didn't spend equal amounts of time with these twelve. Let me jump ahead to a scene where a frantic father comes to Jesus. His daughter's sick and she ends up dying and Jesus is about to perform this crazy miracle when he raises her from the dead and look what happens in Mark 5. It says, "He, Jesus, "did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James." Remember those three guys that Jesus gave the sweet nicknames to? You're not just going to be Simon, you're going to be Peter, which means "rock." And you're not just going to be James and John, you're going to be Boanerges, the Sons of Thunder. So Jesus hung out with Rocky and the Sons of Thunder. They got sweet nicknames and the rest of the guys didn't so, you know, here's Jesus and he invites with him Peter, and he invites with him James, and he invites with him John. And it wasn't just a one-time thing. You know, here's your turn to spend with me. We know of no other story where Thomas and Matthew and Bartholomew that got that kind of special treatment. In fact, if you jump ahead to Mark 9, one of the biggest moments of Jesus' ministry, it says, "After six days, Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them." The transfiguration of Jesus. He kind of pulled back the veil so they could see his glory; his face shone like the sun. He was about to come down the mountain and go to a cross and die but first he wanted to show people that he actually was God, full of power and majesty and glory. And then that big moment - who saw it? The crowds? Nope? The twelve? Nope, just the three; Jesus' three closest friends.

And if that weren't interesting enough, then we jump ahead to the night that Jesus was betrayed. In Mark 14, it says, "they" the apostles, "went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' He took Peter, James and John along with him and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled." That's fascinating to me. Like in front of all the apostles, Jesus said - you know, Judas was gone to betray him - "You eight, you stay here. But Peter and James and John, I need you with me. I need you to pray with me. I'm overwhelmed." It's like Jesus was having a birthday party and he didn't wait for the privacy; he passed out only three invitations in front of all the others. But because Jesus is God and God is always good, that kind of behavior couldn't have been bad.

If that weren't fascinating enough, then Jesus did it again. As we read through the gospels, we find out that Jesus didn't just prefer the 12 apostles and he didn't just prefer these three guys. There was actually one man that had a closer relationship to him than all the others: The apostle John. On the night that Jesus would be betrayed, he made a prediction of his betrayal. He said, "One of you is going to stab me in the back." And look at what John's gospel says. In John 13 it says, "His disciples started at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. One of them, the disciples whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, 'Ask him which one he means.'" So they're sitting at a table and not everyone can sit right next to Jesus. And even Peter, who becomes one of the most famous apostles, doesn't get the prime seat at Jesus' side. He has to sit next to him and ask this man, John, what Jesus meant. And did you catch the special nickname John had? Not just one of the Sons of Thunder; he was called "the disciple whom Jesus loved." When people looked at how close Jesus was to John, they were like best friends. They said that's the guy that Jesus loves. No one else got that name. He wasn't called one of the people that Jesus loved, but the disciple that

Jesus loved. And because Jesus is God, and because God is always good, this friendship could not have been bad.

So what do we learn from the fascinating story of Jesus' relationships? We essentially learn that friendship is not a sin. Being selective, preferring some people's company over everyone's company, is not wrong. It's not sinful; it's actually Christ-like. You can't accuse people of being in a clique because they just hang out with three, or even just one, because Jesus Christ was never cliquey. He was perfect and compassionate and kind and yet, he spent more time with some than others. "Friendship includes a few," and remember that word, "a few preferred companions." You can't spend equal time with everyone; there's some that you just prefer being with for 1,000 different reasons and it's not sinful if you do.

So what exactly does that mean for us today? It simply means this: If you don't prefer my company, that's okay. Like if you're going to have a party at your house and I don't get invited, that's really okay. In fact, the only thing that would not be okay is if it was not okay with me. If somehow I felt so insecure and envious and jealous that I made you feel bad for being close to people, that would not be okay. And that's when it's so important to remember Jesus. To know that those times when the devil wants to pounce and say, "See, nobody likes you. You're pathetic. No one wants to hang out with you." These people - those times when he wants to lie to you, those are the times you need to run back to Jesus because in love, he always prefers us. Jesus, after he said, "Go and make disciples and baptize people and teach them," he said, "And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age." One of the coolest things about being a Christian is to know that we always have Jesus. There's always someone who wants to talk with us; someone who wants to bear our burdens and hear our prayers. Someone who prefers us. Someone who loves to be in our company and that gives us such hope as we wait for God to provide those people who prefer us, too.

So one of the best things we can do as a spiritual community is to protect and to support and to lift up and encourage Christian friendship. But we can't stop there because if you just had your little circle of preferred companions and I had mine, well then this church wouldn't be that much different than a soccer league, the workplace, the middle school. And that's why we have to remember something else that Jesus taught; something, in fact, that's even better than friendship; something the Bible calls fellowship.

Now, I never thought previously that fellowship was actually better than friendship until I talked with Rich. Rich is a mentor of mine and he's really, really, really smart. He teaches at a Bible school that I attended and a couple of months ago, I was trying to pitch to Rich this message. I'd been thinking about it and I shared with him and I said, "Here's what I'm thinking." Like there's this scale of zero to 10 when it comes to relationships. Zero is like your worst enemy; you hate these people and 10 is like your best friend; you'd pick and prefer them every single time. And I said to Rich, I think friendship on the scale, those are the people that are like an eight or a nine or a ten. Rich said, "Mike, why on your scale of zero to 10 of brotherly love, phileo love, is only a seven - or I should say - an eight, nine and 10 and yet, agape, this unconditional love for all people be like a six or seven? It doesn't make theological sense." And I thought oh, my goodness, he's right. This is why I love this man. Because how powerful is it when you actually love people who aren't like you? How amazing is it when you actually care about people and

they care about you even if you're not best friends? How amazing is it when you don't just avoid those kind of awkward people but you throw your arms open to welcome and include the people who will never stand up in your wedding or carry your casket? What makes the Christian church unique is not phileo love; everyone has friends, it doesn't matter what you believe. What makes the Christian church unique is agape. People who learn about God's all-inclusive love for the world that they imitate it in their spiritual community.

I think about Jesus' powerful words from Matthew 5; look what Jesus said. He said, "If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your people," like your own friends, "what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Do you catch what Jesus is saying? Like people who hang out and greet one another and love each other, like the tax collectors do that, the pagans - you don't have to know anything about God to have friends. He says, I'm calling you to something bigger than that; the love and the heart of God. To be perfect, mature, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

And so this is a beautiful challenge for you and for me; it's our next fill in the blank. That friendship includes just the few preferred companions but real fellowship, this unique thing in the church, includes all fellow Christians. It throws open its arms wide and it blesses every soul who walks through the doors. Now I won't lie to you, this is really, really challenging. It's beautiful but it's difficult and especially for those of you who are a little quieter and you like your small circle of people that you know, it's going to be hard for you after church. And here's why you should do it: Because that's what Jesus did for you. When you were born into this world, were you conceived and born into God's inner circle? Nope. Did the sinless Jesus and the sinful you have a whole lot in common spiritually? Nope. But what did Jesus do? He opened his arms so you could be inside the circle. I think about the great words of Ephesians 2. It says, "Remember that at that time," like before you were a Christian, "you were separate from Christ without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ." It's the blood of Jesus Christ that opens up his arms, literally, on a cross that we could be welcomed into God's family. That we're not outside the conversation, we're not outside the circle. Instead, God is so good he invites us in and he calls us his friends. We don't have to be strangers. We don't have to be without hope. We don't have to be without God. We can experience true fellowship with a perfect God for ever and ever because Jesus isn't just into phileo love, brotherly love. He's into unconditional, freely given, agape.

I hope that you and I can practice that in the days to come because it is so beautiful when we do and you've proven it to me. You know, this past November, I celebrated a birthday and you might know when my birthday is but my closest friends do. And so two of my friends decided to surprise me on my birthday. I came in here early to get ready for church on a Sunday morning, I walked into my very organized, beautiful Type A office, and do you know what I saw? I'll show you a picture. I saw this - five hundred post-it notes! I twitched a little bit and I said, "What enemy has done this to me?" And then I realized it was some really good friends. Five hundred notes. Except they didn't just like punk me and put these random notes in my office. They actually gave me a great gift and it was from you; I saved it. These friends had reached out to our church fellowship, the members of our church family, and they had asked, "What do you

appreciate about Pastor Mike?" And you all gave 500 answers. And we might not be best friends and I might not be at your next birthday party but I can't tell you what love like this means to a man like me. It's hard to fight back the emotion as I'm just in this building all by myself reading encouraging word after encouraging word. I actually saved a couple of my favorites. Note 162 says, "Mike has an awesome kickball kick." Yes, I do. I was at a party one time and they let me play with the kid's kickball and I - my soccer skills came into use - and I bombed this thing like into the lake in the back of the yard and I became like the coolest pastor these kids had ever seen. Thank you for remembering that. Number 66: Mike laughs at his own jokes. Yes, I do. Somebody's got to! But this one got to me. This little green piece of paper was sitting right on the chair of my office. It says, "Mike cherishes his wife," which is a really nice thing to say except that day, I didn't. But what you couldn't have known, what my friends couldn't have known, is the night before I had a fight with my wife. And despite everything I preach and unconditional love and you first makes us blessed, I was thinking my opinion, my preference, my wants and I was just an idiot of a husband. I was a sinner. And I woke up like you do when you really mess things up and you feel pathetic and weak and guilty and I kind of moped my way into church and I walk into my office and I see that. All of you speaking such encouraging words but do you know what I feel about myself? Like these people don't know. "He cherishes his wife." I wish more often.

But then my friends left me a really incredible gift. On my computer, I think you can see it in that picture, was a white envelope. And after I read all the post-it notes, I picked up this envelope and inside was a piece of paper and it was another long list. None of the things that you said about me but what Jesus says about me. That because the blood of Christ, there was a list that said, Mike, you're forgiven and you're saved. And you're redeemed. And you're holy. And God delights in you, you're redeemed and you're justified. Just promise after promise after promise. And I realized how blessed we are when we don't just have good friends but we have fellow Christians; people who speak encouraging words but, even more, people who know us so well and they bring us back to the one thing we all need: Forgiveness in Christ.

So brothers, sisters, those of you who are my friends and those of you who are just fellow believers in Jesus Christ, let's exalt these two great gifts from God - friendship and fellowship. We and our community will be truly blessed when we do.

Let's pray.

Dear Jesus, thank you so much for loving us when we're far from perfect. I know there are so many religions in this world that say we have to earn it and our karma has to be good and we have to be better people than we are. I'm so grateful that Christianity's so radically different. Thank you, God, for grace; for unconditional love. Thank you for saying such good things about us when we are so far from being great. I thank you, God, for your forgiveness and your love for me and for all of these people. Thank you, God that you prefer to be in our company; that you are our friend because your Son died on the cross and was raised from the dead.

I pray for everyone here today who doesn't know you that they would see something so powerful in this place, this would be different than a sport's field, different than the workplace; that there'd

be real love for all the different kinds of people. God, help us to be different and may that bright light draw this community to your cross and to your unconditional love.

I pray, God, in your mercy that you'd give us good friends. I think of the power of my friendships here in this church; people who know everything about me and yet, they don't run away. They still like me, they still spend time with me, they still forgive me in Jesus' name. I want that for everyone here, God. So would you give us patience to wait until those relationships come? And if we have them, would you just draw us to our knees in praise and worship that you put grace on top of grace and give us blessing after blessing? Thank you, God, for our friendships; thank you for this fellowship. I pray that we could leverage both for your glory and for our good.

I pray all these things, Jesus, in your beautiful, powerful name, Amen.



## TIME OF GRACE®

### *Friend Request: Different Kinds of Friends*

#### Study Notes

#### *Summary*

What does it mean to find a Christian friend? Is that the same thing as being part of the fellowship of a church? This message explores what it means to have friends who share your faith as well as the important distinction between the fellowship of Christians and the self-selected blessing called friendship.

- “One who wants more than what Christ has established does not want Christian brotherhood. He is looking for some extraordinary social experience which he has not found elsewhere.”—Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- “The oftentimes freely swinging barn door of relationships we find in our churches today suggests that we might not fully take seriously the implications of the fact that Jesus’ call to love one another is, first and foremost, a divine command.”—David Horn
- Christians must remember the difference between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
- **Mark 3:16-19:** These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter), James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means “sons of thunder”), Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.
- **Mark 5:37:** He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James.
- **Mark 9:2:** After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them.
- **Mark 14:32,33:** They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled.

- **John 13:22-24:** His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, “Ask him which one he means.”
- Friendship includes a *few* \_\_\_\_\_ .
- **Matthew 5:46-48:** If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.
- Friendship includes *all* \_\_\_\_\_ .
- **Ephesians 2:12,13:** Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

### *Points to Ponder*

1. Put yourself in the sandals of a disciple of Jesus like Thomas. How would you have felt if you weren't in Jesus' inner circle like Peter, James, and John? What would you have to tell your heart in order to avoid accusing the sinless Son of God of sinning?
2. Reread Matthew 5:46-48. What would it look like for your church to carry out Jesus' words? What would be different for you next Sunday if you put them into practice?
3. Why is your friendship with Jesus essential for lasting and untouchable joy?

### *Homework for Next Week*

Google “Bible passages on friendship,” and dig into God's truth on becoming a great friend.

*“[The believers] continued to hold firmly to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers.”*

*—Acts 2:42 EHV*