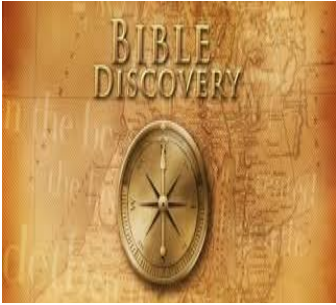


October 25, 2015

John 15:9-17

The Friendship of God



“I won’t be your friend unless you...” How often have we overheard our children say this? For that matter, how often have we heard adults, even ourselves, say such a thing? We may have framed it in a more sophisticated way, of course, but when we come down to it, we know that’s what we meant. We too demanded our own way; we too held our friendship ransom to conditions of our own making. How refreshing God’s friendship is never like that. Solomon understood the wisdom of how “A friend loves at all times...” [Proverbs 17:17] Is it not such understanding that leads us to joyfully sing, “What a friend we have in Jesus; all our sins and griefs to bear; what a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer”?

As the evangelical church we’ve sometimes overlooked the simplicity of God’s Gospel – we’ve become focused on the small part of which we’re involved in while forgetting the big part God accomplishes for us – that God accomplished for us even while we were still sinners determined to live without any God telling us how to live. But if we’d really accept the message God has for us it would cause us humbly to recognize that God loves us. God really loves us. We’re important to God! Did you hear that? You’re important to God! That’s because God has committed Himself to people. He created us to have fellowship right from the beginning and when we messed it up; God provided the plan by which the relationship could be restored - a plan available to everyone who will accept His grace. Listen to what God asks of fallen mankind – you and me - through the prophet Ezekiel, “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways!” [Ezekiel 33:11]

In fact, beyond just turning from our evil ways, God wants to fill the void left by sin’s departure knowing an empty vessel fills with all sorts of troubled waters, calling us to be His friends, to follow Him even while here in midst of this world, to look always heavenward toward an eternal fellowship with Him in glory, and to share the warmth and joy of that wonderful friendship with others around us. In the midst of instruction given through Moses for how Israel would be a nation separate unto the Father, yes in the midst of all the instruction, rules and regulations handed down in Leviticus, we find this magnificent announcement: “I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people.” [Leviticus 26:12] God’s desire for this relationship has never wavered, never faltered, never changed.

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This amazing statement, the promise of God with us, Immanuel, with slight variations, occurs again and again through scriptures – even in the announcement of God’s own Son, Jesus coming to earth. His very name reminds us that God is with us! From the beginning as God walked in the garden with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening through to His promise at Revelation 21:3, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be his people and God Himself will be with them and be their God” the message has always been one of amazing confirmation that God is a God of fellowship, a God intent on relationship with us - HIS creation. In His Son Jesus we see clearly He is a friend of sinners – choosing to be friends with Mary Magdalene, a former demonic; Levi the treacherous tax collector; Peter, the fiery fisherman who’d denied him three times; Saul the self-confident scribe determined to rid the world of Jesus’ followers yet saved by Christ to open God’s love to the gentile, to proclaim the good news and give us two thirds of our new testament; Dave Adams, the lost and forsaken child who thought he could do it on his own terms in between each and every stumbling moment; and thank God, a sinner like you.

So what should we consider TODAY as we enjoy the friendship of God? Jesus illustrates first our relationship’s not one of our making – it originates with God, saying, “You did not choose me, but I chose

you..." [vs. 16] This special relationship is a covenant or binding relationship which is initiated completely by God. Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of the nineteenth century wrote, "We are sadly unmindful of our God but He is graciously mindful of us." It's God who makes the first step, often while we're oblivious to His presence, attending to life as we know it, thinking ourselves blissfully secure in our own world or else suffering quietly or in anger, in either case alienated from peace and joy and love. Abraham was settled quite comfortably (thank you very much) in Haran before being called to father a nation leading to all sorts of trials and tribulations, Moses was tending sheep and enjoying married life having run away from problems in Egypt – perhaps happy to have his past behind him - not relishing the thought of facing Pharaoh with the message to set God's people free, David was content being a shepherd, playing his tunes, never dreaming of being king, Peter and John were preparing their nets for another day of fishing until they were called to be fishers of men. Mathew was enjoying the rewards of a lucrative career as a tax collector yet with Jesus' simple request, "follow me", Matthew got up and followed him leaving his old life behind. Jesus came to each of them, drawing them into His circle, making them his friends. He did the same for me patiently calling until I heard Him and said yes to His call. I hope the same is true of you today.

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Within this special relationship originated by God is the assurance it's a relationship of the heart. God knows laying down rules for us won't get us walking with Him daily any more than pasting a list on the fridge gets our kids to do their chores without us checking in and encouraging them. Only a miraculous change of our heart can do that. So that's exactly what God does. God changes the hearts of those who belong to Him so we find in our inmost being we want to walk with Him; we want to keep his commandments. The love that wells up in our heart means we do what we do out of love, not legal necessity. Listen to the way Jesus explains it... *"Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love..."* It begins with love – the love shown through Jesus freely given to us causing us to love one another; the relationship which unites us as disciples of Jesus. Two results then stem from this relationship: obedience and joy.



It's a relationship of the heart.

If we're branches within the vine of Christ, if we're followers of Jesus, then obedience marks the cause of our fruitfulness as those branches demonstrating whose we are; joy is the consummate result of our obedience as we continuously enjoy a close and meaningful relationship with our Lord and Saviour. This eternal message is at the heart of our living a life in Christ. Jesus intends that we live a life which is both spontaneous and joyful filled with Him, overflowing with the love He has planted in our hearts rather than plowing along the ruff furrows of existence feeling our lives burdensome and boring.

Further, because we're in relationship with our Lord rather than a contractual agreement of arduous compliance, we're guaranteed success. Jesus says that if we obey His commands, we remain in His love. In other words, while it's love that draws us into relationship with Jesus to begin with, compelling us to please Him by being obedient to His commands, our compliance in turn ensures we continue in his love. Consider a healthy marriage. I can't speak with certainty for the ladies, but I know when I fell in love with my wife thinking I could not possibly love her more than I did at first, I wanted to meet her needs, I wanted to please her and make her happy and while I pursued the many ways in which I could do this I discovered a love that was so much deeper than when I first was in love with her. The same is true in our walk with Jesus. As baby Christians we think we love Him – and we do – but we grow to love Him more and more everyday as we walk with Him and do as He commands us to do through His Word. The subsequent

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joy which logically follows disciples when we realize that Jesus is in us, that Christ loves us, leads us to bear fruit. Let's return to verse 10. I mentioned Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you", but He went on to say, "And appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last". Bringing fruition to our lives in sharing Jesus daily is something we could never do in our own strength, knowledge or decision. But that's what Jesus does through us as we obey Him – it becomes a natural by-product of living life in the vine of Christ. Just as we breathe in oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide, without much effort on our part to control it, Jesus' love flows out of us and reflects Christ for those around us. If they're compelled to seek, they become curious of how we've changed, how we're different then the world around us giving us opportunity to share our love of Jesus with them. Isn't interesting Jesus doesn't set out another set of rules for how we bear fruit? He simply tells us to "love each other" as "I have loved you" [vs. 12]. Paul explains it to the Ephesians by saying, "Be imitators of God, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us..." [Ephesians 5:1-2] So the essential message of what I am bringing to you today is this: It is possible to be friends with God! John records Jesus' promise to us, "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, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." [vs. 14-15]

Just as we breathe in oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide, without much effort on our part to control it, Jesus' love flows out of us.

The question is, "Have you found that friendship for yourself?" Let me leave you with this assurance: God will never let His children go. He's opened to us His heart; He's given us His Son Jesus as the atonement for our waywardness. Our friendship with God is based on His covenant not our purity, on His decision not our success, on His righteousness not our perfection. We're forgiven because of the sacrifice of Christ, we're made friends through His shed blood and broken body; we're no longer foreigners to the covenant of promise, living without hope and without God. We're established in a committed relationship with God – off the market, unavailable to any other suiter (and that means hands off from the enemy) – for God will never let us go! God's covenant is with us forever. Because this promise is eternal, it gives us a solid foundation on which to lay hold of when we feel far from God. We're told, "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind; 'You are a priest for ever.' Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant." [Hebrews 7:21-22]

Loyal friendship's the very hallmark of God's covenant relationship with us; He expects us to demonstrate that same love through all our relationships with others. Yes! God wants us to be loyal, dependable friends to others meaning treating one another the same way God's treated us – forgiving, caring, loving. It means not submitting to gossip, not using words that hurt, not demanding our own way, not putting ourselves first. It means living Christ in and through us so we can truly love one another. God's our best friend! He sealed that friendship with an eternal covenant written in blood, made in His Son Jesus Christ, and it can't be broken! Knowing we're in this covenant relationship with Him does it not give you a humble confidence? It should! There should be such a deep sense of gratitude toward your Heavenly Father that you turn to Him alone, you look to Him for your every need. If you'd be a friend with God as He is a friend to you, you'd choose to have it reflect in the way you live daily and in the way you act toward each other, in the way you act toward the world around you.

We'd love to hear your feedback on being the vine of Christ. Are you walking with the Lord and trusting in Him daily? God's friendship is not to be taken lightly. He desires to be your friend today. Give us a call or send us an email and let us know your thoughts.

Blessings,

Pastor Dave