

A Friend to Jesus

M. W. Bassford, 3-4-12

The life of Jesus leaves no doubt that He was indeed the Friend of sinners. Not only did He believe in them and give them a chance when none of the righteous Jews of His day did, He was willing to surrender His sinless life as the atonement for their sin. He didn't do this only for the sinners of His day. He did it for us too.

Jesus' friendship is shown by His actions, and if we want to be His friends in return, that must be likewise evident in our actions. Jesus Himself puts this quite plainly in John 15:13-14. Lots of people like the idea of being a friend to Jesus. They'll wear the cross jewelry and put the fish bumper sticker on their car. They'll get all weepy-eyed and emotional every single church service. This makes sense; after all, Jesus is an extremely good friend to have.

However, once we start talking about how we have to obey Jesus' commandments if we want to be His friends, the crowd thins out quite a bit. Obedience is not nearly as warm and fuzzy an idea as friendship is. It requires first of all that we know what the commandments of Jesus are, and if we want to do that, we have to go to church and study the Bible on our own and do a whole bunch of other things that most people find boring. Second, once we know His commandments, we actually have to keep them, and that is tough! As the rich young ruler found, the tough commandments aren't the ones where Jesus forbids us to do something. In fact, the "don't" commandments are comparatively easy. The hard ones are when Jesus commands us to do something, and in doing, to give everything.

Nonetheless, it is keeping His commandments, especially the positive commandments, that marks us as true friends of Jesus. None of us will ever succeed perfectly at this, but all of us must try, not out of some twisted hope of justifying ourselves, but to show Jesus that we love Him. Let's look, then, at what it takes to be a friend to Jesus.

Love and Belief

There are a number of different commandments we could examine here, but today, we're only going to look at some commandments of Jesus that are in the same general context as His John 15 statement. Those are the commandments that were most on His mind when He told us we had to keep them. The first of these commandments is to **LOVE ONE ANOTHER**. This shows up in several places in John 13-17, but especially in John 13:34-35.

Talk about a perfect example of how hard the positive commandments are! Christianity would be so very much easier without the command to love. We could make a sin-avoidance checklist and go through our days not murdering and not committing adultery and not lying, and so on, and God wouldn't have any excuse to mess with our heads, to tell us what our thoughts and feelings ought to be too. On the sin-avoidance scale, we look pretty good. Jesus never murdered anybody, but I've never murdered anybody either, so I'm just as good as Jesus, right? In fact, I think there are a lot of Christians who adopt loveless Christianity precisely because it doesn't require very much from them.

Of course, we can flip-flop to the other extreme too. We can adopt a definition of love that is so internal, emotional, and vague that it doesn't require anything of us either. There are plenty of Christians who do this too, who look down their noses at brethren they consider Pharisaical, yet ironically don't behave differently from the Pharisees.

Love isn't something that is displayed in our thoughts and words. It is displayed in our actions. Look at 1 John 3:16-17. If our lives are a bank account, love means that we hand Jesus the checkbook and tell Him to withdraw what He wants, even if what He wants is everything. If my brother needs all the spare time I have this week, that means that Jesus gets to zero out the time balance, so that my brother gets everything and I get nothing, even if I'm already exhausted by a tough work schedule. If my brother needs my love and my support, Jesus gets to withdraw everything from the love account. To make things more literal, if my brother needs my money, then Jesus gets to take my money and give it to my brother. Of course, all of these things are not going to happen every single week, but they do happen much more than we want to admit. As long as there is a brother whom we can help, love means that we don't belong to ourselves.

Second, if we want to be friends to Jesus, we must **BELIEVE**. We learn this from an equally familiar passage, John 14:1-2. I'm sure that Jesus knew that this was going to be a tough sell to His original audience. After all, He knew that 24 hours from the time He said these words, He was going to be dead, and His disciples were going to be scattered and fleeing for their lives. They had just seen their Messiah crucified like a highway robber, and they were supposed to believe? I think that situation pinpoints the problem with the claim that faith isn't a work, because faith in a situation like that is work, and it's hard work! Sure, maybe no one else can tell that something's going on, but inside your head, you're in a gunfight with the devil, and you're the one who's brought a knife! All of us will encounter crises of faith like this. Sometimes they're really conspicuous, as when a loved one dies or falls away from Christ. At other times, though, they're subtler, when the devil's the one with the knife, and he's trying to shave away at our faith bit by bit.

As was true of love, the only way that we can tell how firmly we believe is by looking at what we do. Jesus touches on this idea in Matthew 6:19-21. In context, Jesus may well have been speaking of financial treasure, but the principle applies to anything that we value. After all, things are valuable to the extent that they are limited. If I have two weeks to finish my sermon, who cares if I go take a walk for half an hour and think randomly spiritual thoughts? On the

other hand, if the hard drive on the building computer crashes at 8:00 Sunday morning, and I have 45 minutes to reconstruct my lesson, I am certainly not going to waste a single one of those minutes on anything non-essential!

So, then, all of us have limited resources of valuable things: time, energy, money, and so forth. How do we invest those resources? Do we invest them to generate an earthly reward, or to generate a spiritual reward? The earthly rewards are easy to see. If I take \$200 and use it to buy a new sound system for my TV, the next time I turn on my TV, boom! There it is. The spiritual rewards are often much less obvious. If I take that \$200 and put it in the collection plate, there is no outward change in my situation at all, unless I claim it as a tax deduction. The only reason why I would choose the spiritual over the physical, then, is because I believe that the spiritual is more important, even if I can't see it. The choices that we make reveal either our faith or our lack of faith. If we lay up our treasure in heaven, that will only fix our heart more firmly on heaven, but if we lay up treasure on earth, we will learn to love only what we must inevitably lose.

Abiding and Remembering

The third of Jesus' key commandments in this context is that we must **ABIDE IN HIM**. He expresses this thought in John 15:4. As this text makes clear, though, the abiding that Jesus is talking about is a reciprocal one. We must abide in Him, but we must also allow Him to abide in us. The second of these two ideas is probably the most familiar to us. Over the past few years, we've studied at some length the passages that concern the indwelling of God in us, and this is a similar idea. When Christ abides in us, it doesn't mean that He literally takes up residence in our heads. It means that He lives in us and through us, that it is His will that influences us and controls us. We belong to Him, not us.

The idea of abiding in Jesus, on the other hand, is less intuitive. Obviously, this doesn't mean that we influence or control Him. Instead, as John 8 reveals, by this, Jesus means for us to abide in His word. The Scripture needs to be our long-term, permanent place of residence, both in study and in practice. If we treat the word like a vacation home, and abide in the word during church services or on Christmas and Easter, that's not abiding. Instead, the word must be where our thoughts dwell, and our lives must be conducted within its bounds. That's what it means to abide in Jesus.

Jesus gives this concept its practical application when He links it to bearing fruit. If we abide in Jesus, we will bear fruit. If we don't, we won't. Jesus further elaborates on this idea in Luke 6:43-44. If we want to know if we abide in Jesus, the only way to find out is by looking at what we actually do. Good intentions don't count. Neither do excuses. 2012 is two months old already. What have we done for the Lord this year? Have we become more diligent in assembling with the saints? Are we making progress in driving some sin out of our lives? Have we done a better job at loving our brethren in deed and in truth? Have we tried to teach the gospel to outsiders? Or are we clinging to the illusion that we are bearing fruit for God somehow, somewhere, but when we're put on the spot, we can't come up with any? Friends, if we aren't bearing fruit, we aren't abiding in Jesus, and He isn't abiding in us. That's an awful thing to say about any Christian, but it's a hard truth that we must recognize about ourselves if we aren't working for the Lord.

Finally, if we want to show ourselves to be the friends of Jesus, we must **REMEMBER**. There are all kinds of worthy things in the Bible that we could remember, but we see what Jesus is talking about in John 15:20. We saw Jesus' original take on this idea back a few weeks ago, during our study of foot-washing in John 13. There, He used it to emphasize that if He was willing to lower Himself to serve others, we must be willing to do the same. Here, His application is somewhat different. Here, He's telling us that if we are His disciples, we can't expect to be treated better or differently than He was. Jesus made a lot of enemies during His lifetime, not through any sort of evil behavior, but by telling the truth to people who didn't want to hear it. On the other hand, He also saved a lot of souls, by telling the truth to people who did want to hear it. We're not better than Jesus. We're not gifted with greater persuasive powers than He had. If we tell the truth like He did, we will save a lot of souls too, but we will also make a lot of enemies.

A lot of Christians aren't willing to do that. They would rather avoid confrontation, avoid sensitive topics that might produce heated conversations, so that they don't put any strain on the relationships they have with those on the outside. To put it in another, less complimentary way, they want to be friends with the world, and they want to be spoken well of by the world. Jesus says, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you!" James tells us that friendship with the world is enmity with God. We must recognize, brethren, that when we don't make the hard choice, that too is a choice.

Ultimately, the problem there is that we are thinking of our lives as other than something for Jesus to have. Look, by contrast, at the way that Paul talks about His own life in Philippians 1:20-21. Paul wasn't concerned with using his life to honor himself, to get all kinds of compliments from men, to create a whole circle of people who wanted to be his friends. Instead, his goal was to use his life to honor Christ. He considered this so important that he said that to live was Christ. Here's what Paul meant by that. He meant that his goal in life was to live in such a way that if Christ literally did take over his body and control his every action, nothing would change. Is that our goal for our lives, to make every choice the way that Jesus would have made it, to give ourselves wholly to His will? Or is our goal to be ourselves, with a little bit of Jesus on the outside like a new coat of paint on an old house? Brethren, it's not enough for us to change our spiritual colors. We must change our selves. That's the commitment that shows that we want to be Jesus' friend.