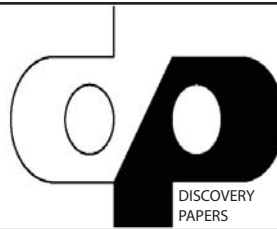


FRIENDSHIP IN FAITH

SERIES: BETWEEN THE TIMES



Catalog No. 20150315
1 & 2 Thessalonians
4th Message
Paul Taylor
March 15, 2015

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

Everybody wants friends. This desire is one of the most universal things in life. To illustrate this, I thought we'd watch a brief movie clip. Many of you know that Leonard Nimoy, the actor who played Mr. Spock in the Star Trek movies passed away a few weeks ago. I'm certainly not a Trekkie, but I came across this movie clip showcasing the friendship between Mr. Spock and Captain Kirk. I thought it would be appropriate to begin this morning by watching it.

In the movie clip from Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan¹, we see the ultimate act of friendship: Spock sacrificing his life for his friends.

There is a lot of powerful imagery in this clip. We see the love of a friend for another, the willingness to sacrifice, and the great statement, "I have been and always will be your friend."

I think we love watching movies about friendship because friends are important to us. But, at times, we find them challenging. How do you make friends later in life? How do you maintain friendships across distance? How do you know which friendships to pay attention to? How do you work through conflict, disappointment, misunderstanding, and unmet expectations? Friendships are important, but not easy.

This morning we are continuing a series on 1 and 2 Thessalonians that we've called *Between The Times*. As we'll see this morning, these books talk a lot about the return of Jesus as something that we look forward to. But they ground that hope in the memory of Jesus' death and resurrection. They help us to figure out how to live our lives in between these two significant events.

We started by looking at how the church was founded in Acts 17, then for the past two weeks Scott Grant taught us from the first two chapters of Thessalonians. We left last week thinking about how the apostle Paul gave his life away to the people to whom he ministered.

This week we're picking up with 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13 and we are seeing the result of Paul giving his life away. When you give your life away to other people, what you get in return is friendship. Paul feels strongly about the Thessalonians. He really misses them. He desperately wants to visit them again. As we read his words, we're going to see the depth of friendship centered on the gospel. We'll see the power and purpose of *friendship in faith*.

Before we go any further though, we should clarify what we are talking about by friends. We're not talking about how many people you've clicked a button to accept on Facebook. We're not talking about friends as opposed to family or colleagues or neighbors. We're not talking about Best Friends Forever's —the 2 or 3 people you feel closest to in the world. We're thinking about friendship as a broad category.

Our passage unfolds in four different sections. In the first part, Paul is lamenting the fact that he can't be with the Thessalonians. If you were here when we looked at Acts 17, you might remember that he had to leave the city in a hurry. That is why he misses the Thessalonians.

In the second part, Paul says that because he missed them, he sent them one of his companions, Timothy, to find out how they were.

In the third section, Paul describes how he felt when Timothy returned to him with good news about how the Thessalonians were doing.

Paul closes with a prayer that God might make it possible for him to visit Thessalonica again.

As we look at these sections, we'll see that each one of them teaches us something significant about friendship. We see the value of friendship; we see how friendship relates to pain; we see the fun of friendship; and we see how friendship affects our relationship with God.

Throughout this message we'll be thinking about our own lives. Do we really value friendship? Do we experience it as much as we'd like? What prevents us

working toward better and deeper friendship? How does God help us in that?

So let's see how Paul's friendship with the Thessalonians stacks up against Mr. Spock and Captain Kirk, and what we can learn for our own friendships.

Work for Friends

Our passage begins with Paul describing the pain that he felt because of having to leave the Thessalonians in such a hurry.

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20:

But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face,¹⁸ because we wanted to come to you-- I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us.¹⁹ For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?²⁰ For you are our glory and joy.

Paul really liked the Thessalonians. He tells them how much he wants to visit them. He says that he tried, but something kept getting in his way. But Paul makes a really powerful statement here about why he wanted to visit them so much. He explains why it was so difficult to be torn away. He does this by drawing a picture that involves the return of Jesus.

In seminary we were taught to be careful about how many sports illustrations you use when you preach. It might be true that life is a lot like football, but that doesn't exactly resonate with everyone. It seems the apostle Paul didn't go to my seminary, though, because his main picture here is a classic Ancient Near Eastern sports analogy.

Paul is describing the end of a race or some kind of an athletic competition. The event is over and the judge approaches the contestants to reward the victory. In this case, the judge is the Lord Jesus and the timing is his second coming: the return of Jesus to earth.

Paul imagines Jesus approaching him and placing something called the "crown of boasting" on his head. Other translations call this the "crown of exaltation". This is what the winner goes home with. The trophy. The medal. The plaque. This symbolizes the great accomplishment that has just occurred.

That's the image Paul gives us. Jesus presents him with the crown of exaltation. The crazy thing is what the crown refers to. Think about what Paul has done: He wrote most of the New Testament; he planted churches; and he articulated theology. Paul accomplished an incredible amount.

But here he tells the Thessalonians, "You are our glory and joy." You know what our biggest accomplishment is? It's you. It's our relationship. Our friendship. That's my glory. You are my crown of boasting.

This is a powerful idea. Last week Scott Grant encouraged us to give our lives away by pouring into people. This week we see that the people whose lives we pour into become our greatest accomplishment. Friendship is our greatest achievement.

Not a lot of people in this area think that way. People move here to accomplish great things. They get advanced degrees to make a difference in the world. People want to start companies, build buildings, create products, innovate technology, make money, become famous. Achievements are the mark we make on this world. We want to leave a legacy that is solid. Something that is measurable. Something we can point to and say, "I did that."

What has been your greatest achievement in life? What do you spend the most effort working toward? What if the most significant thing that you could possibly accomplish is to develop friendships in Christ? Paul's claim that friendship is his greatest achievement ought to motivate us to value friendship much more than we do. We work hard at accomplishing so many things. Do we work hard at friendship? We need to. *Work for friends.*

I spend a lot of time working on sermons. I study the Bible. I try to identify the main ideas. I look for illustrations that help us to understand. I pray about what message God has for us today. I try to craft something that is true to the text, interesting to listen to, and that helps us to approach God and love the people around us.

I'm grateful that PBC keeps all of these sermons. We post audio, video, and text versions online. Sometimes we get emails from people halfway around the world who use and appreciate our sermons. It can be tempting to think that this might be my legacy; that the work I've put into sermons is going to be what I leave the world.

But, I don't think that's actually true. If the book of Romans wasn't Paul's crown of boasting, then my sermons certainly aren't going to be mine. My greatest achievement will be the time that I've spent with people—pouring into them, praying with them, listening over coffee, studying in small groups, asking for help, partnering in ministry. This will be my greatest achievement. This doesn't mean my sermons aren't important, it just helps to put them into perspective.

The problem with seeing friendship as our greatest achievement is that it's so hard to measure. You can count how much money you've made. You can brag about your title. You can hang a plaque on your wall and marvel at a trophy. These things impress people.

Friendship isn't measurable. It isn't impressive. It isn't easy. But it just might be the most important thing that we can spend time on. Do you count friendship as an achievement? Do you work as hard at being a good friend as you do at being a good employee? Are you more likely to go the extra mile for a hurting friend or for an end-of-the-year bonus?

Friendship in Christ is a great achievement. *Work at it.*

Friendship Makes Sense of Pain

In the first part of our passage, Paul talks about how upset he was about being torn away from the Thessalonians. Now he explains that he sent one of his companions, Timothy, to them because he desperately wanted to find out how they were. Read his explanation in 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5:

Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ²and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. ⁵For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

Twice Paul talks about not being able to bear it any longer. This is the reason why he sent Timothy to the Thessalonians. But he also describes what he

was afraid of. He tells them why sending someone to them was so important. He fears for their faith. He is afraid that his labor would be in vain; that this great achievement of friends in faith would be ripped away.

The reason he is worried for them is because of pain. He says he sent Timothy "so that no one be moved by these afflictions." Other translations say "disturbed" or "shaken" or "unsettled." He's worried that pain will shake them from their faith.

We already know that Paul and his companions were mistreated in the city of Thessalonica. And we found out earlier in this chapter that these new believers were mistreated as well. In 1 Thessalonians 2:14 Paul tells them, "you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as [the churches in Judea] did from the Jews." Apparently, even early on in their faith, the Thessalonians suffered because of believing in Jesus.

Paul was worried that this pain—the pain that he experienced and the pain that the Thessalonians themselves experienced—would destroy their faith. He thought that they might throw in the towel. He was worried that the Thessalonians would give up their faith in Christ because it was just too difficult to keep believing.

The same thing happens today. Pain is one of the main reasons that people walk away from God. People deal with tragedy in their lives or the lives of their loved ones and they walk away from God. Whatever it is that they are asked to face is just too much. They can't believe that God would ask this of them. They can't imagine a loving God allowing them to go through something like this. So they walk away. They lose their faith.

Paul was worried that this would happen to the Thessalonians, so he sent Timothy to them. He understood that friendship helps us to make sense of pain.

You are going to suffer. It's unavoidable. You can make all the money in the world. You can run the most successful company. You can have as many degrees as possible. But nothing can prevent you from suffering. Most of us understand this intellectually, but a lot of us don't live like it.

We act like our efforts can ensure we don't have to suffer. But it just doesn't work that way. We can't prevent suffering, but we can go through it with someone else. That's why Paul sends Timothy to the

Thessalonians. This is what we can do when life hurts. We're going to suffer, but we can choose to *suffer with friends*.

A few years after my wife and I were married, some close friends of our had a miscarriage. They had been excited to be parents and now they were devastated. So we went to them. We went to their house and sat with them. We didn't say much, if anything. We were just there.

I don't think we made it any less painful. We didn't take away the hurt. But I think it helped for us to be there. Our presence helped in the midst of pain.

Henri Nouwen, the Christian author, said, "The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing... not healing, not curing... that is a friend who cares."²

Something happens when you suffer with someone else. Maybe you've never allowed yourself to experience this. It is vulnerable and mysterious. You can't really explain how things have changed. The pain isn't gone, but it is shared. It's not easier. It doesn't make it fun. But sharing the pain makes it better. Somehow the pain makes sense when someone else is there with you.

The side effect of suffering with friends is actually that the friendship itself gets stronger. It leads to a depth of friendship that playing golf and board games, and watching movies just can't achieve. When you suffer with someone or face a crisis together, something happens in that friendship. There is a new kind of connection.

Friendship makes sense of pain. And pain can build a friendship. *Suffer with friends*.

Friendship Brings Life

Paul began by talking about missing his friends. Then he explained how he sent Timothy to them to help them deal with the suffering they were facing. Now, he talks about the relief that he felt after hearing the news that Timothy brought.

1 Thessalonians 3:6-10:

But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always

remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you—⁷for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. ⁹For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

Paul was really happy to hear how things were in Thessalonica. The word he uses for "good news" is the same word translated "gospel" in other places. Paul was glad that their faith was strong. He was glad to hear that the Thessalonians felt the same affection for him that he felt for them. Overall, he says that he was comforted through their faith.

Do you know that feeling when you see an old friend after some time has passed? Maybe you haven't even kept in touch, but when you're back with that person, it's like nothing has changed. You hear about their life and know that they are doing well; you remember the old jokes and fall back into the same comfortable rhythms together.

This is how Paul felt when he heard back from Timothy about the Thessalonians. They were okay. It was such a relief. Knowing their faith was strong filled him with joy.

Now we see what might be the most basic fact about friendships. Friendships are fun. Friendship brings life.

Paul says that this news has comforted him. He says "now we live." He talks about how thankful he feels. He describes "all the joy" that they are experiencing. This isn't that complicated. Friendships make life more fun. They help us to really live. We need to view our friendships as great achievements and work at them. We need to go through struggles together with our friends instead of facing them alone. But we also need to enjoy our friends.

Sometimes Christians can get pretty serious. We like to talk about life. We listen to sermons about what God wants for us. We try to be intentional with our decisions. And sometimes we can take a fun topic like friendship and sermonize about it and make it a project instead of something that is just simply fun.

I hope that doesn't happen this morning. Friendship is supposed to bring us life. We are

comforted by our friends; we laugh with our friends; we play sports, we drink coffee, we watch movies, and have parties with our friends. Nothing is as fun as being together with people who know you, love you, make you laugh, comfort you, and fill you with joy.

When I was in high school, my youth group from Texas went on a summer trip to Minnesota. We drove our old church van there for a musical bike tour mission trip. It's a little hard to explain. But on that trip, I met 30 other high school students and something happened. We didn't know each other perfectly. We had only recently met. But that experience was powerful.

I remember coming home from that trip, riding in that old church van, and just weeping. I think we probably listened to this old Michael W. Smith song called Friends around one hundred times.

*"Friends are friends forever
if the Lord's the Lord of them
And a friend will not say never
cause the welcome will not end
though it's hard to let you go
in the Father's hands we know
That a lifetime's not too long
To live as friends."³*

We listened to that song over and over and over again, bawling our eyes out. We had tasted something of friendship that was different. Meaningful. Connected by Jesus. And fun—really fun. It was like we had tasted life in a new way.

I think many of us are familiar with this feeling as kids, but many times something happens as we get older. Friendship seems like it's for children. Mature people don't really need friends. Spiritual people don't need to laugh and play games. Life can get focused around responsibilities and obligations, and friendship can just seem like a waste of time. When was the last time you had fun with your friends? Do you have friends that fill you with life? Don't think that fun isn't important. *Enjoy life with friends.*

Friendship Makes Us Holy

Now we get to the last section of our passage. Paul has lamented his absence. He has explained why he sent Timothy. He has recounted his joy at hearing Timothy's report. He finishes with a prayer that God would make a visit possible at some point in the future.

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13:

Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹²and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Even after hearing the great report from Timothy, even knowing that he can write the Thessalonians a letter and say much of what he wants to communicate to them, even with all that, Paul still desperately wishes to be with these people. He wants to be with his friends. He wants to be in the same place.

Again, we see the depth of affection that Paul feels, but here a new reason is attached to it. The reason he wants to visit them is not just to be with them, but for a special purpose. Verse 13 explains, "so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness."

This passage is so rich. Friendship is a great achievement. Friendship makes sense of pain. *Friendship brings life.*

Now we have a new spiritual twist on all of these things. Friendship makes us holy. Paul wants to visit them so that they might be established as holy. Friendship makes us holy.

When we think of holiness, we usually think of our character. To say that friendship makes us holy sounds like I'm saying that friendship makes us into better people. Our character is growing. We sin less and love more. I think that's part of it, but I'd like us to consider a different aspect of what Paul is saying.

Becoming holy is not just getting better. It's not a character improvement program. Becoming holy is entering into relationship with God in a deeper way. It is knowing God more deeply. Sharing in his experiences. Understanding what it feels like to love another person. To sacrifice. To initiate. To be rejected. To persist in love.

John states in 1 John 4:7, "whoever loves has been born of God and knows God."

Friendship is an essential part, not just of God's character, but of his very essence. Relationship is built into the very identity of who God is. This is the great mystery of the Trinity. God is all about relationship.

Because God, in and of himself, is a relationship. God is one person in three. God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

That's how it's possible for God to be described as love. Because even without anyone else in the room, God is loving. Because of his nature as three persons, he constantly lives in a love relationship. This ought to blow our minds. It's almost too deep for us to understand.

What this means is that when we experience friendship, we experience God in some mystical way. Deep relationship with another person allows us to enter into the very experience of God himself. So don't take your friendships lightly. Something holy is happening there. Intimacy leads to holiness. Don't stay on the surface with everyone. Go deep to experience God in friendship. Go deep with friends.

Do you know all those lessons you learn when you start to live with someone? Maybe it's your first roommate in college. Maybe it's when you got married. Maybe it's sharing a bedroom with a sibling growing up. Sharing a living space with another person can be challenging, frustrating, and complicated.

But imagine sharing an identity. Imagine being a Trinity. Being one person in three. If you think being roommates is tricky, try being person-mates.

I really like gadgets. I read all the technology blogs and follow all the latest devices. One of the things that is hot right now is virtual reality. Several companies are coming out with devices that you can wear that immerse you in a completely different experience. You can be on the beach or on Mars or fighting a war.

Friendship is like a virtual reality device for knowing God. We put on friendship. We are vulnerable with someone else. We sacrifice for them. We accept their sacrifice. We learn to love and be loved, and we are transported into the experience of God. We know God as if we've put on a virtual reality headset that transports us into God's experience.

And once again, Paul anchors this idea in the return of Jesus. We become holy and know God so that we can recognize him when he comes back to earth. So that we can prepare for his return. So that we can anticipate it and look forward to it. We know God through friendship now as we wait to know him fully.

Conclusion

We started off by thinking about the friendship of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock. I found that movie clip as part of a list of films' most notable friends. Woody and Buzz from Toy Story. Ferris and Cameron from Ferris Bueller's Day Off. Laurel and Hardy, for those old enough to remember them. Harry and Ron from Harry Potter for the younger ones among us. Sam and Frodo from The Lord of the Rings. And for the engineers out there: R2D2 and C3PO from Star Wars. We recognize something powerful about close friendships.

After Spock dies, Captain Kirk has this to say: "Of my friend, I can only say this. Of all the souls I have encountered in my travels, his was the most ... human."⁴ This is, of course, ironic because Spock wasn't actually human. But somehow, Spock's act of sacrificial friendship made him embody something powerfully human.

This is what friendship in faith does. The gospel of Jesus Christ redeems us. God makes us new through the preaching of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit. God makes us human like we were meant to be human. A big part of that is friendship in faith.

Friendship is an achievement. *Work for friends.* Friendship makes sense of pain. *Suffer with friends.* *Friendship brings life.* *Enjoy friends.* And friendship doesn't just make us fully human. It also helps us to know God in a powerful way. Go deep with friends.

Thomas Aquinas, the 13th century theologian had this to say, "There is nothing on this earth more to be prized than true friendship."⁵ Nothing on this earth more to be prized.

So what do we do? What is your take away? Here is my challenge to you. The most powerful thing you can do in friendship is to invite someone into it. Make a move. Take the first step.

Paul's statements here are incredibly vulnerable. The Thessalonians could easily say, "That's great that you feel so strongly about us, but we're not interested." Friendship begins when you make yourself vulnerable.

Do you want to make a friend? Invite someone. Is there a friendship that needs repairing? Reach out. I don't care if they started the conflict. Make the first move. Have you been hurt by someone? Talk to them. Nothing happens unless someone initiates.

I know that your friendships are complicated and there's more to the story, and it isn't that easy. But *it is* that easy. Just reach out. Make a new friend. Reconnect with an old friend. Restore a broken friendship. It doesn't matter. But make the first move.

That's the example Paul gives. It's the example that Jesus gives as well. In what we were some of his last words, Jesus said to his disciples, "I have called you friends" (John 15:15).

Take a risk so that you can experience and enjoy this kind of friendship as we wait for Jesus to return.

Notes

¹ *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*. Dir. Nicholas Meyer. Perf. William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy, and DeForest Kelley. Paramount Pictures, 1982. Film.

² Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press)

³ Michael W. Smith. "Friends." *Michael W. Smith Project*. Reunion, 1982. Album.

⁴ *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, 1982. Film.

⁵ *Aquinas, Thomas*. 13th Century.