

## 2. iFriends: What are they for?

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'd be very glad if you'd turn in your Bibles to Genesis chapter 1. We have two short readings this evening, and the first is from Genesis chapter 1, beginning at verse 26.

Then God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over the livestock, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.

So God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over everything that moves on the earth.

And God said, Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.

And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the heavens, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.

[ 1 : 37 ] And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made. And behold, it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the sixth day.

Now please turn on in your Bibles to the New Testament, to John chapter 15. John chapter 15.

Jesus speaking to his disciples. And I'm going to start at verse 9, on page 902. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.

Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love.

These things I've spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you.

[ 2 : 54 ] Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing, but I have called you friends.

For all that I've heard from my Father, I've made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.

These things I command me, so that you will love one another. Amen. And may God bless his word to us, in the reading and the understanding, this evening.

February 4th, 2004, was an enormously important date, for that was the date, on which Mark Zuckerberg, a Harvard student at the time, launched the Facebook, an online network for Harvard students.

Within two weeks, demands were coming in, from all over the Boston area, from other schools, to join in. Within four months, Facebook had added, 30 other college networks.

[ 4 : 24 ] That summer, Zuckerberg went to California for the summer, and he never came back. He developed the concept further. Millions of users were added. That year, another social network, Friendster, offered to buy, the Facebook, for 10 million dollars.

In autumn 2005, it opened up, the high school students, and then work networks. And in September 2006, only six years ago, for the first time, it opened up, to anyone with an email address.

In summer 2006, two years after the first, Harvard experiment, Yahoo offered to buy it, for a billion dollars. By the summer of 2007, it was adding a million new users, per week.

In April 2009, just five years into the enterprise, 200 million active users, were registered. That's nearly 3% of the world's population.

Just under a year later, six years in, there were 400 million users. In March this year, the world population reached 7 billion.

[ 5 : 34 ] Around the same time, the number of regular, that means monthly at least, Facebook users, topped the 1 billion mark. 200 million new users are added per year to Facebook.

4 million a week. 570,000 people joined today, if today's a statistically average day. One in seven people in the whole world are regular Facebook users, and if you discount the 1.3 billion who live in China, who have no access to it, then the rest of the world is using it more than that.

On any given day, at least 50% of those who are regular users, use Facebook in some way. That is to say, on any day, one in 15 people in the world, uses Facebook.

Breathtaking, isn't it? Welcome to the second in our series about the online life. We're thinking today about online friendship, its pleasures and pitfalls.

And Facebook is a great place to start, because it epitomizes what the online thing means for many people. And of course, it's not the only social network out there.

[ 6 : 49 ] Social networking is one of the most dramatic developments in the last few years, and it's all about friends. For those of you who don't know about Facebook, don't know about Facebook, some of you will say, how is it possible to be a living being without knowing about Facebook?

It is possible, let me say it is possible, there are many people in this room who've never, ever used Facebook, and they have just as much fun in life as you do. Facebook is a social networking site.

It's a place for friends, for interaction. It is possible to have real friends, and not be on Facebook.

But if you want Facebook friends, what you do is to go online, sign up, set up your page, look for your friends who are also already on Facebook, and you let them know that you want to be their Facebook friend, and they say, yeah, all right, and you get a little message back saying that you now are their Facebook friend, and you interact with them.

You send them little messages, you exchange videos, and pictures, and loads of kinds of stuff, all sorts of things, whatever happens to interest you.

And then you get introduced to their friends, and you do the same with them, and so it goes on. You just relate. The average user on Facebook has 250 Facebook friends.

[ 8 : 10 ] Yes, if you have less than that, you are a below average user. I have nine. Though, I'm thinking of adding a few more. Friendship is big business online, billion dollar business.

But can I be the only one who wonders whether more is less? Sometimes. 250 online friends, on average, for one in seven of the world's population.

But would you say that on the whole, ours was an age characterized by confidence in friendship?

By confidence that one is really known and really loved by real friends?

Is ours an age characterized by security in relationship with others? By a sense of purposefulness in relating to others?

For all our relating, do we actually know anyone any better? My impression is that the knowledge of self and of others is rather more elusive than we might wish, and that online relating is rather more superficial than we might like much of the time.

[ 9 : 32 ] Two examples of that, both given to me by the same good friend. First, her observation of another friend, who is regularly up till 4 or 5 a.m.

on Facebook, just chatting, unable to put it down, for fear that something might be missed, or that they might be perceived to being rude by coming offline.

Something deeply insecure about that, is there not? I must check Facebook to see if anyone's been in touch, or if anything has happened out there. The same friend expressed her, the difficulty she found in pursuing proper friendship online, because of two things.

One, constantly being interrupted by multiple people messaging, always the sense that other people are looking on. And second, the huge burden of guilt that she felt, because she had not talked recently, to all of those Facebook friends.

Once upon a time, old friends exchanged Christmas cards. Now they have to talk all the time, because they can. Just as TV news brings you into contact with more human suffering, than you can possibly interact with meaningfully.

[ 10 : 53 ] So the online community brings you into contact, with more individuals, than you can possibly, be friends with properly. It's very difficult, to be more than superficial.

And what is a friend, anyway? Now there's a question. Is there any meaningful answer, to that question, apart from, well, somebody I message on Facebook?

My friend. What does that signify? The impression I get, is that the commonest use now, of that term, is, somebody who knows me, and I chat to occasionally.

Someone has asked this question, if I'm friends with everybody, am I really friends with anyone? My impression is, that there's more talk, and less depth.

More information, less understanding. More interaction, less knowledge. Who do you know? And who knows you?

[ 11 : 55 ] The Bible holds out to us, the prospect of depth, in friendship. We're going to be exploring that, this evening.

You should have been given, a handout when you came in. This, of course, is, we're not working from one passage, this evening. And the main purpose, of a handout, is to give you, the references of the passages, that we're looking at briefly, so that you can go and check out, whether they really say, what I'm suggesting they say.

Because we'll only be dealing, with each one briefly. Proverbs 18, 24, says this, a man of many companions, may come to ruin, but there is a friend, who sticks closer, than a brother.

Acquaintance, and friendship, are very different things. What might true friendship, look like? Well, one of the things, we faced last time, is that since the fall, we human beings, are hiding beings.

Turn to Genesis chapter 3, would you? I'm going to read, a little section, from verse 7.

[ 13 : 14 ] Adam and Eve, have disobeyed God. Verse 7, then the eyes of both, were opened, and they knew, that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves loincloths.

And they heard the sound, of the Lord God, walking in the garden, in the cool of the day. And the man, and his wife, hid themselves, from the presence, of the Lord God, among the trees, of the garden.

But the Lord God, called to the man, and said to him, where are you? And he said, I heard the sound, of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.

He said, who told you, that you were naked? Have you eaten, of the tree, which I commanded you, not to eat? Adam and Eve, cover up physically, in front of one another, and in front of God.

And that's a symptom, of being estranged, from God, and one another, because of their sinfulness. An estrangement, that is most acutely felt, face to face, in person.

[ 14 : 20 ] Our sinfulness, makes it, genuinely uncomfortable, to be known, as we really are. And especially, face to face.

And because being face to face, as we are, is difficult for us now. Our face to face, relationships, are often driven, not by what we are, but what we want, to be seen as.

One thing we're going, to explore this evening, is the issue, of image. In Genesis chapter 1, verse 26, we read, these striking words.

Let us make man, in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion, over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, and all the other creatures. Originally, we were made, bearing the image, the mark, the stamp, the imprint, whatever you call it, of our creator.

And among other things, I take it that that means, when you saw Adam and Eve, in action in the world, that God had made, doing what God, had given them to do, you would think to yourself, you know, the way those two, are working together, has the fingerprints, of the loving God, all over it.

[ 15 : 40 ] They're doing it, the way he would do it. Now, of course, since Genesis 3, all of that has changed. And the image of God, is marred in us, not absent, but spoiled.

You look at human beings, in action now, and so often, you don't see anything, that looks like, godliness at all. And at the same time, there's this, hiding thing, going on.

We cover ourselves up, and instead project, a different image, to the world. The person I would like to be, the person I'd like others, to think of me as.

Now, of course, that's something we know, face to face well enough, don't we? On one hand, we're often, guarded in relationship, face to face. There is information, about ourselves, that we don't want to give away, at least not to everyone.

We don't want others, to see through us. On the other hand, sometimes, there are things, we're very proactive, about communicating to people, about ourselves.

[ 16 : 43 ] Things we want people to know, the person, that we'd like people to see. Now, of course, when we're face to face, with people, often people, do see things, that we'd far rather, they didn't see.

And they see through, the things, that we want to project to them, to what we're really like. But online, you can't do that. And that, of course, has its difficulties.

Because that opens the door, to us presenting ourselves, as people who are, quite different, from the people, that we really are. And we can't be checked out visually, because no one can see us. Even the visual aspects, of online relating, are deceptive. I was talking to somebody, a couple of years back, about his wife's, Facebook page. He, had her permission to do that.

He said to her, all your friends on Facebook, look really nice. She said, oh, they don't really look like that. They just choose, choose the pictures, that look most like the person, they'd like to be seen to be.

[ 17 : 56 ] This presentation, of a different self, is at its most extreme, perhaps, in Second Life. I don't know, if you've come across Second Life. Second Life, is a free, online, virtual world, imagined by, and created by, its residents.

On Second Life, you can be, exactly who you want to be, who you imagine yourself as. Physical characteristics, your name, your clothes, your interests, all of those, you can choose, and then be online, the person you want to be.

And Nottingham, where I came from last, and Nottingham University, has a Second Life campus. You can choose, if you want, to go, as your imaginary self, to Nottingham University, Second Life campus, and pay real money, to be educated there.

I was talking to somebody, here in the congregation, last week. He has friends, a married couple, who at home, sit in separate rooms, and interact with one another, through their alternative personalities, on Second Life.

You can be, who you want to be, even in your marriage, in a different room. The temptation, to be, who you want to be, who you would like, to be seen to be, is magnified, online.

[ 19 : 19 ] Anybody, who's tried, to keep an honest diary, in the real world, will know, how hard it is, to present, the truth about yourself, even to yourself, in a diary.

But online, there is the freedom, to do that, with little possibility, that anyone, will check up, that what you reveal, about yourself, is true. That you are really, the person, you say you are.

And that is something, to be careful of. I'd like you to turn over, to Timothy chapter 3. 2 Timothy chapter 3, page 996.

Now this is a passage, about teachers of untruth. We're not really looking, at the context here.

These are people, who are lovers of self, not lovers of God. But, the characteristics, described here, have the, have human nature, all the way through them.

And there is a particular phrase, I want to point you to, in verse 13. Evil people, and imposters, will go on, from bad to worse.

[ 20 : 31 ] Paul is talking about, the work of false ministers there. And then the phrase, he uses to describe them, deceiving, and being deceived. Now that, that combination, deception, and self-deception, is a regular, pairing in the Bible.

Self-deception, and the, and the deception of others. The image I portray, may not be just, the deceptive version, I want other people to see.

It may be the way, I think I really am. Of course, none of this is restricted, to the online world. But it's all exaggerated there, because I can't see you, and you can't see me.

It's possible then, that online, I may have many, many friends, none of whom know me. The reason they don't know me, is not only that, I don't really want them, to know me properly, but that I don't, I don't really know myself, properly.

self-deceived, as well as deceiving. Now, with that slightly gloomy picture, of human nature, as exemplified online, in mind, let's turn over, to John chapter 15.

[ 22 : 00 ] Because, wonderfully, the Bible holds up, out to us, the prospect, of real relationship, real knowing, and being known.

John chapter 15, page 902. These are the words of Jesus, to his first disciples. Now, clearly, they are different from us, in some ways.

We are not them. We've not seen Jesus, face to face, as they did. They are his apostles. We are not. But I take it, there are things here, that they have in common, with all people, in relation to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me make a few statements, coming out of this passage. First, the Jesus we meet here, in John chapter 15, is one who is not deceived, for a moment, about who we really are.

If there's one thing, that's clear about Jesus, in the gospels, it's that he's not naive. He is not the sort of person, whose eyes you could easily, pull the wool over. He's not the sort of person, who, if he was your Facebook friend, would be taken in, by the stuff that you put, on your page.

[ 23 : 15 ] He is not the sort of person, you could trick, into thinking well of you. He's a person, who sees, right through, all those he comes, into contact with.

In chapter one, Jesus says, to Nathaniel, here is a true Israelite, one in whom, there is nothing false. And Nathaniel says to Jesus, how do you know me?

And Jesus replies, I saw you under the fig tree, before Philip called you. I knew your heart, before I laid eyes on you, he says.

Or in chapter four, the Samaritan woman, at the well, says to him, or says about him, after a brief conversation, to her friends, come and see a man, who told me, everything I ever did.

Everything about her, is known, by, to him, and she knows, that it is. Jesus is not taken in, by human beings, not then, not now.

[ 24 : 21 ] And yet, he offers to us, that we can be, his friends. Look what Jesus says, verse 14, to his disciples, and I take it to us, you are, my friends, if you do, what I command you.

Jesus, is not deceived, yet, he offers, real friendship. Second, Jesus, is not a deceiver. Verse 15, no longer, do I call you servants, for the servant, does not know, what his master, is doing, but I have called you friends, for, all, that I have heard, from my father, I've made known, to you.

Jesus, does not deceive. When he speaks, he is not interested, in projecting, a nice image, of himself.

Rather, he insists, that he has a task, to fulfill, to pass on, to his disciples, all, that he has learned, from his father.

Now, that is an enormous theme, and it's written, all the way, through John's gospel, bedtime reading tonight, skim through, John's gospel, and find those occasions, many of them there are, when Jesus says, something like this, I'm only speaking, what the father, has given me to say, I'm only doing, what the father, has given me to do, you've seen me, you've seen him, I do, what he speaks, I reveal, I reveal, what he reveals, here is a person, who is following, a much, much, greater agenda, than the projection, of a personal image, that he wants people, to have, now that is enormously, encouraging, is it not, we know, how even the best, of friendships, can be marred, by self-deception, and deception, but neither, of those, are part, of what Jesus, has come to bring, or to do, in relationship, to him, he's come, not first of all, because of us, but first of all, because the father, has sent him, because the father, has given him, words to pass on, because the father, has given him, works to do, and he says,

[ 26 : 51 ] I do that, and that's, the only thing I do, Jesus, is not a deceiver, third, Jesus, takes loving, initiative, this passage, John 15, is stuffed full, of statements, that give great, assurance, about the loving, initiative, of Jesus, towards us, human beings, so that we, might enter, into relationship, with him, verse nine, I have loved you, verse 10, I have obeyed, my father's commands, verse 11, I have told you, verse 12, I have loved you, verse 14, I command, verse 15, I've called you friends, verse 15 again, I have made known, the father's things to you, verse 16, I chose you, verse 17, I command, the initiative, the initiative, is his, is it not, it could not be fuller, of reassurance, that Jesus, the undeceived, non-deceiver, has taken, loving initiative, so that we might, know him, in loving relationship,

Jesus, has taken initiative, and can I say, fourth, that means, a revolution, in friendship, in friendship, and this is the amazing truth, of the Christian message, that in an age, full of incredible uncertainty, in relationship, an age characterized, by insecurity, manipulativeness, deception, and self-deception, we can be, properly known, known as we are, without pretending, and accepted, not because, we're good to know, or because, once again, we've done a good job, of pulling the wool, over somebody's eyes, but because, of the overflowing kindness, of one, who wants, to be known, by us, and to know us, one, who's knowing, of us, is not condemning, but cleansing, forgiving, recreating, one, who has, not been tricked, into accepting us, but instead, has done everything, through his death, on the cross, and his resurrection, to make us, clean, and acceptable, it's a revolutionary thing, it changes, the whole order, of friendship, on Facebook, we count, how many friends, we have, and are no doubt, superficially reassured, if we have, more than nine, but Jesus, turns friendship, on its head, it's not,

I'll be your friend, it's, you are my friends, if you do, what I command you, he's at the center, of friendship, and again, that's wonderfully, reassuring, for we don't have to go, and persuade him, to

be our friend, true friendship, has him at the center, him taking the initiative, him calling the shots, him in charge, him as its security, it depends on his loving initiative, and his faithfulness, and his power, and his consistency, and not ours, can I say, that if you're not yet, in that most, precious, of friendships, well today, would be a great day, to thank him, for all that he's done, to make, real knowing, and being known, and accepted, a reality, and start obeying, his words for yourself, there is no other offer, like this, in the universe, being known truly, and yet, being accepted, there's nothing like it, anywhere else, don't miss out on it, don't forget about it, don't ignore it, don't push it, to one side, but if you're a person, who does know, what it's like, at least beginning, to know, be known by Christ, and be accepted, as you are, here are some questions, to help you think about, what you're doing, in the friendship stakes, being a friend, or being a Facebook friend, if you want to be specific, ask yourself this, what is my online life, doing for me, it is doing things for us, isn't it, think of the time, you spend online, it must be delivering things to you, must it not, a lot of time, why do I have to check Facebook, all the time, why do I have to tinker, with my profile, all the time, why do I love it so much, when people get in touch with me, does it make me feel loved, does it make me feel secure, does it make me feel special, does it make me feel significant, does it give me a sense, of being known, and being accepted, is it a substitute, for knowing God, is it a substitute, for relating face to face, what am I getting from it,

I must be getting something, from all the time, that I spend, second question, what am I using it for, the Bible is not focused, so much on having friends, but on being a friend, what am I using, my online life, for, having friends, or being a friend, projecting an image, or being a friend, to people, am I using it, for self-promotion, or for the benefit, of others, am I using it, to serve myself, or to serve others, what am I using it for, this powerful tool, that is Facebook, and all that other stuff, that we use, third question, what is my online profile like, who is the person, that I'm projecting, to the world online, is it clear, that I'm a Christian, is it clear, not just that I'm a Christian, but that Jesus, is the focus, of my life online, or is Jesus Christ, just one of my interests, along with Metallica, and go-karts, and whatever else it is, am I a lover, of the Lord Jesus Christ, online, or a self-promoter, with a Christian label, would anyone look, at my online profile, and activity, and say, now there's a life, that's running, to a different tune,

Facebook's a great tool, potentially, very powerful, but like all tools, it's not what they are, that's the issue, it's how you use them, that's the issue, might it be said of us, that we're a people, who are noticeably Christian, online, noticeably, serving others, online, rather than promoting, our own image, let's pray together, greater love, has no one, than this, that someone, lays down his life, for his friends, you are my friends, if you do, what I command you, no longer, do I call you servants, for a servant, doesn't know, what his master, is doing, but I have called you friends, for all that I've heard, from my father,

[ 35 : 23 ] I've made known, to you, you did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go, and bear fruit, and that your fruit, should abide, heavenly father, we thank you, for the generous, love, that is demonstrated, so clearly, in these words, spoken by your son, and not only, in his words, but in his actions, and supremely, in his death, on the cross for us, we thank you, that because of him, and in him, it is possible, for us, to be known, as we are, and yet, accept it, because of the wonderful, forgiveness you've won, for us, in him, and we pray, heavenly father, that you would help us, to repent, of being merely, self promoters, self publicists, help us, to be people, who, grasp with both hands, the love, the friendship, that you've held out to us, and seek to use that, for, the love of others, and the service of others, and the promotion, of your son, in his world, till he comes again, hear us, we pray, in his name, amen.