

Friendship

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[0 : 00] Well, if you'd like to turn in your Bibles to John's Gospel, chapter 15, page 902 in the Church Bibles, and we're going to read from there in just a few minutes, but let me just say a few things first to introduce a new series that we're going to begin this morning.

Over the next weeks, running up to the summer, we're going to do something a little different from normal. We're not going to begin studying another book of the Bible just now, but we're going to think in a more topical way about some issues to do with human relationships.

I'm going to call it Aspects of Love. Don't worry, it won't be anything to do with the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical. It will not be that leading our thinking. It will be the Bible. But a number of you have asked me to deal with some of these subjects again from the pulpit, particularly concerning issues to do with romantic relationships, marriage, family, and so on.

And I discovered it's seven years, actually, since we focused on that in any particular way, so I think it might be right to do so again. Last time, it resulted in a rash of marriages followed by a rash of births.

So if we do that again, we will need our new space for the creches. But anyway, it is an area of our life, isn't it, that's very important. But it's also an area of life that seems perennially difficult for many.

[1 : 25] And of course, our society in the last seven years is not less, but even more confused than ever about everything to do with areas of relationships, and especially areas of sexual relationships.

Because we live in a world increasingly obsessed by sex, romance and marriage, yes, but utterly confused, it seems, about almost every element of these things.

So that at the same time, what we think we treasure, what we even worship in these relationships, we are actually cheapening and devaluing in an extraordinarily destructive way, I think.

Destruction of personal happiness and security, of family stability, and even of community and societal health and cohesion.

All of this is suffering. And Christians, of course, are not immune to any of these pressures because we are, first of all, human beings. And we are affected by the same pressures, the same struggles that are common to man.

[2 : 29] And of course, whether we like it or not, we have to recognize that we are also creatures of our own time and culture. And we are much, much more affected by the atmosphere that we live in than we like to admit.

And so that means that the truth is that any church, and yes, that means our church too, will find that issues abound in this whole realm of relationships.

And the truth is that many of us are struggling with all sorts of things, with marriages that are under pressure, with the sad aftermath of broken marriages, with all manner of sexual problems, from the scourge of pornography, which is an almost universal scourge, if not an absolutely universal scourge among men, at least, whether married or single, to sexless marriages, the very range of other specific issues like that.

Some are struggling with the heartbreak of unrequited love. Some are struggling with the pain of strained relationships with children.

Some are struggling with the agonies of infertility. Some have the awful pain of children who are in homosexual relationships.

[3 : 58] Some are struggling with the challenges of same-sex attraction themselves. Others with different challenges of undesired singleness.

And on and on and on I could go, and I'm only just talking about things that I know about personally, things I've discussed with some of you in the recent past.

Now, all of that seems to me that it makes two things clear. First of all, we've got to be real and realistic. We've got to face up to the fact that there are real and live problems of this nature among Christians, and we can't pretend that it isn't so.

It just won't do. Nor does it help any of us, does it, to be too pious to ever mention these things. It certainly helps me to know that I'm not alone in my struggles in this area, and I think it ought to help all of us to know that that's the case.

So, if you're feeling that perhaps you're the only person or maybe the only couple in the church which struggles and battles with issues like this, let me assure you, you are absolutely not. You're not alone.

[5 : 03] So, we've got to be real about these things. And secondly, that being so, I think we have a responsibility to confront these sort of issues together as a church. So, as to be seeking the help that there is in God's Word together for all of these areas of our lives.

And the Bible has a very great deal to say, doesn't it, about relationships, about love, about family, about marriage, yes, about sex. And it's there for our instruction.

It's there for our help. It's there for our godliness. And if we believe that the whole Word of God is for all the people of God, then that means that we all need instruction in these areas.

It tends to reason. If Hebrews 13 verse 4 tells us that marriage is to be held in honor by all, and if it tells us that the marriage bed, that is, the matters of sexual activity, are to be undefiled, then that must mean that all must be instructed as to how that can be so, whether we're married or single, whether we're young or old, whether we're male or female.

There are some things, in fact, there are many things that we all need to know and that we need to know that we do all know so that we can help each other to be a people with a healthy and a wholesome approach to relationships, sexual relationships and other relationships.

[6 : 31] Now, that is not to say, of course, that the pulpit is the only place to talk about these things, nor that everything that some people need to be hearing can be dealt with in this public corporate way.

There are things that need to be dealt with very explicitly. For example, how sexual relationships can be good and right and proper within marriage. There are things about that which I think are inappropriate to deal with here.

These sort of things are for marriage seminars for couples or indeed for one-to-one marriage preparation or marriage counseling. These things, though, are necessary.

It seems to me they're increasingly necessary in our messed-up society. And we've got a duty to help one another in down-to-earth practical ways in all of these things in any church.

But these things are specific for those marriages and sexual relationships. Some of those things, I think, are not for a mixed congregation. But there are things that we do all need to hear together.

[7 : 35] There are things we need to deal with. And because of the pervasiveness of so many of these matters of sexuality in our society, in the media, in social media, in parliament, in the school playground, in the school classroom, and sadly, much of what now is taught as normal in the school classroom is just as bad as what is paraded among kids in the school playground.

That's the state that we're in. Sadly, there are things, I think, now that we have to talk about publicly that we'd rather not talk about. Perhaps in the past, it didn't have to. So we've got to walk a careful line of balanced biblical realism.

We mustn't be prurient. We mustn't be becoming too obsessed with these matters, just as our culture is. But at the same time, we mustn't be prudish either. The Bible actually is remarkably open, remarkably unembarrassed about talking about human sexuality.

And often it does it in a very earthy way, which makes us a little squeamish. But I think we should be thankful for that, because God has our good and our best at heart. So my hope is that in dealing with some of these key areas of teaching, it'll perhaps help some of us to open up to others and be helped by others.

And indeed, that we'll all be better at helping one another to have wholesome and healthy lives to the glory of God, but also to our own blessing and our own fulfillment in our own lives and in God's service.

[9 : 05] Maybe at some stage, a bit later on, we'll have an opportunity for a Q&A; about some of the issues that are raised. But please do come to me with questions that are raised.

And if there are things that you particularly want me to cover, then I'll try and do the very best that I can. And so that this is a series that helps us all, whoever we are, whatever relationships we have, to be the best that we can be for the Lord.

But today, I want to turn to a subject that you might hardly think fits into a series like that on aspects of love, and it's the subject of friendship.

It's really very undervalued in our world today, but I think the Bible values it very greatly indeed. So we're going to read just briefly a few verses from John chapter 15 at verse 12, where Jesus himself speaks about real friendship.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.

[10:17] You are my friends if you do what I command you. No 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 have 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 might give it to you.

These things I command you so that you will love one another. Well, amen. May God bless his word to us and may he help us as we think about these things today.

Friendship is, I think, very often undervalued today, but I also think that the Bible makes this aspect of love quite fundamental to our nature as human beings.

Humans are not created to be solitary creatures. We're created for friendship, friendship with God and friendship with one another. That's the picture we have of God and man as God meant man to be before the fall.

[11:39] And that's the goal also of God's redeeming grace. James reminds us that Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness and he was called a friend of God.

And as we read, Jesus said to his disciples in the upper room, no longer do I call you servants, but I have called you friends. We've seen in 1 Peter that we are God's household.

We're his family, not by the accident of physical birth, but we are a family of his friends. And God's primary answer to the greatest need of human beings, not to be solitary, but needing to belong, is this friendship of his own family.

As the verse on the sheet says, Psalm 68, verse 5, father of fatherless and protector of widows, God settles the solitary in a home.

Now we live, don't we, in a world where people are craving for intimacy and that is natural. As I said, we are not solitary beings. But our world is, I think, totally confused about this need for intimacy and we have confused it with a need for sexual relationships.

[12:55] We think that the real deep personal relationships of trust and belonging, the things that we really desire and need for, we think in our world that that comes only from a sexual relationship.

That is what our culture tells us. But the Bible says that is not so. It's not marriage that is the answer to the solitary state in the Bible.

It is the friendship of real family. And above all, it's the friendship that comes from true fellowship with God and the family of God. And so in that sense, friendship must be the greatest love of all, mustn't it?

Because love never ends, says Paul. When the perfect comes, that is, the coming of God's kingdom, the imperfect, the partial will pass away.

And according to Jesus himself, sexual relationships will pass away. In the glory of the new creation, there will be no marriage, no giving in marriage.

[13:59] But it is there in the glory of new creation that there will be the completeness of intimacy that we have all desired for. Intimacy with God and with one another.

And so the great irony is that we live in a society where there are sexual relationships are plenty and yet precious little real intimacy often. It's true, isn't it?

Sex can be empty of real and deep, satisfying love. But the Bible says that we can have deep and real and intimate love quite apart from sex.

So I want to think today about friendship as an aspect of love quite distinct from romance or sexual or even family affection. Of course, many relationships involve different aspects of love and especially a lifelong relationship of marriage will involve many of these things.

But it's vital that we're able to make distinctions between these different aspects of love. One of the saddest features, I think, in our culture today is the poverty of real friendships.

[15:08] In the past, and especially, this is true among the ancient cultures, friendship was actually exalted as the highest form of love, much above the sort of physical instinct, need for love, the biological urge for sex and so on.

Friendship was held up above all of these. But today, I suppose it's partly because of the biological reductionism of Darwinism. People tend to see ourselves as just animals like the rest.

And the sentimentalism of the kind of new age thinking that's around today that diminishes any sense of man's uniqueness. We're not made as a crown of God's creation. We're no different to dolphins or bats or trees even or insects to some people.

And then there's the extreme narcissism of our age, of our individualistic culture. It's my needs as defined by me that must be met. All of these things, I think, have led to the exaltation of the physical and the urges and the desires that I consider to be natural to me.

That's what we see in our culture, and that's why the sexual is so exalted in everything. And for the satisfaction of my sexual and my emotional needs has become the criterion of most importance in human relationships.

[16:29] I think that's a fair comment. And the confusion of romantic love, of sexual love with friendships, means that we will assume that all close and intimate relationships must probably be sexual relationships, either between the opposite sex or even between the same sex.

And if there are deep and meaningful relationships between people of the same sex, nowadays people assume they must be homosexual ones. Twenty years ago, certainly thirty years ago, if two women were to share a house together, nobody would have ever even remotely thought, well, they're probably a lesbian.

But today it's probably the first thing that goes through people's minds, isn't it? And at the same time, relationships that are less than full sexual relationships are often devalued and denigrated.

So our friendship's not real unless it becomes a sexual thing. But that, I think, has resulted in a real poverty in human relationships. Not only are there so many dysfunctional and broken sexual relationships, but there are so few real friendships of deep and lasting and meaningful quality.

Now there's a great, great need in our culture, certainly in the church, to rediscover friendship, real friendship. And as Christians, of all people, surely we should be a demonstration of what it means to be a society of friends.

[18:02] Being real friends and having real friendships, especially with one another. So what is real friendship and what does it require?

Well, I'm going to draw this morning very heavily on two places. First of all, C.S. Lewis's essay in his book, *The Four Loves*, which I still find the most helpful thing on this whole area.

And then a little later on in some explicit wisdom from the book of Proverbs. But let me try and summarize under four headings this morning. First of all, real friendship is born of a shared love. Love, that is, for something outside of ourselves and beyond each other. Friendship is born out of a meeting of minds more than a meeting of bodies.

It must be about something. It must be about some shared interest, some passion, some commitment. The image is not of being face-to-face, concentrating on each other, as lovers are.

[19:04] But rather, the image is of being side-by-side, two people looking the same way with the same vision and going the same way together. As C.S. Lewis puts it, Lovers are always talking to one another about their love, friends hardly ever about their friendship.

Lovers are normally face-to-face, absorbed in each other. Friends are side-by-side, absorbed in some common interest. It's something outside of ourselves, isn't it, that binds friends together. It's a shared love, a hobby, music perhaps, or art, or football, or even peculiar things, like keeping a special breed of hens, or something as ridiculous as that.

It might not be always easily definable what it is, but for real friendship to be possible, it must be about something outside of ourselves.

It must be on a plane of appreciation of things for their own sake, rather than for the mere gratification of our senses, or our certain personal sense of need.

[20:10] Because only that kind of appreciation of something for its own sake is something that can be shared in that way with other people. And it's that kind of sharing of appreciation, rather than a sharing of need, which is the basis of real friendship.

That's why I see, as Lewis points out, very often people who just desperately want friends, nothing else, can't seem to make any. He says the very condition of having friends is that we should want something else besides friends.

Because real friendship is born out of a shared love for something beyond ourselves, beyond our needs. A shared selfless passion for something else, or for someone else.

Friendship, says Lewis, must be about something, even if it were only an enthusiasm about dominoes or white mice. Those who have nothing or share nothing, sorry, those who have nothing can share nothing.

Those who are going nowhere can have no fellow travelers. You see how true that is. You just imagine, think of two people traveling from one highland village to another.

[21 : 26] Now, if those are just two locals who are on the bus because they need to get from A to B, very likely that they won't be looking out of the windows, they're not looking at the scenery, they don't even notice it.

The only thing they're sharing is a seat together on the same bus. But if sitting behind them, there are two tourists who have come from the depths of the city, and they've taken that bus from village A to village B purely so that they can look at the beauty of the scenery of the hills, and the sky, and the sea, and all of these things, then that is quite different.

They're taking that journey for the shared pleasure of talking about the beauty of the scenery.

They'll be talking about it the whole way along. They're sharing something way beyond just their need for something or their need for each other.

And their shared love of that beauty is going to add to their friendship. You see the difference. So if friendship is born out of shared love, then it follows, doesn't it, that the nature and the quality of friendship is going to be relative to the importance of what it is that they share.

And that means, of course, for Christians, that the shared something that we have is a shared love for Christ himself, a shared desire to love him and to serve him.

[22 : 48] And that means that a friendship that is born out of that shared love, that shared passion, that shared zeal, then it's going to be the highest quality of friendship that life can possibly afford to us.

It must be so. And that kind of ultimate friendship, if you like, is going to be quite impossible, isn't it, in an unequal yoking with somebody who isn't a fellow lover with Christ.

At best, that kind of friendship is going to be incomplete. It's going to be imbalanced. Of course, it doesn't preclude friendships on many, many levels with people who are not Christian, but it does mean that you can't expect the deepest and the most satisfying of intimate friendships with somebody who doesn't share your greatest love.

I mean, that just stands to reason. Either if they don't share it at all, or if they don't share it to the degree that it is absolutely central for you.

And that's very important to remember, isn't it, before you allow a friendship to develop into a romantic relationship with somebody, even if they are a fellow Christian.

[24 : 00] It's very easy to fall head over heels in love with somebody, to be so much gazing face to face, to be so much caught up with the physical attraction and romance, so much caught up with the face to face, that perhaps you don't realize that there actually isn't a great deal else that really binds you together as friends side by side.

If that's the case, young people, be careful. Because the first flush of that romantic love will fade in time, and so will the second, and so will the third.

And there'll come a time when face to face just isn't quite as exciting. I would say to young couples who are contemplating marriage, it's the side by side aspect of your relationship that will keep a marriage together, when the face to face aspect gets a little more saggy.

And I'm afraid that's the way it tends to go. Make sure that you don't find yourself getting into a romance or a marriage where you discover later on that in fact you don't share very much outside yourselves.

So that you find that in fact you're actually not going anywhere together. Those who have nothing can share nothing. Those who are going nowhere can have no fellow travelers.

[25 : 23] Friendship is born of a shared love beyond just ourselves, beyond just our needs. And we all need real friends like that, don't we?

Real Christian friends especially. My experience in churches, I think women are better at that. If I say to somebody, mention a particular woman and say, now who are her friends? Usually somebody can immediately say, oh she's really friendly with so and so and so and so and so and so. Say it about a man, and it's not nearly so easy. That's a problem then. It's a problem and we've got to be very careful about that. And don't make the mistake that if you're married, then your marriage alone is enough. It's not. That leads me to the second thing. That real friendship flourishes and is fruitful when it is itself shared. That is, real friendship is by its nature inclusive.

[26 : 25] I said there's a lot of confusion in our relationships that stems from the confusion of romantic love, eros, as C.S. Lewis calls it, being in love, the confusion of that with friendship.

And that today friendship is devalued while sexual relationships are exalted. But you see, we can also confuse the right pattern of the exclusivity that belongs to sexual relationships with the shared inclusivity that is central to real friendship.

Let me quote C.S. Lewis again. Eros, that is, romantic love, while at last is necessarily between two only. But two, far from being the necessary number for friendship, is not even the best.

And the reason for this is important. If of three friends, A, B, and C, A should die, then B loses not only A, but A's part in C. While C loses not only A, but A's part in B.

In each of my friends, there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself, I'm not large enough to call the whole man into activity. I want other lights than mine to show all his facets.

[27 : 38] Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's reaction to a specifically Charles joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him to myself as it were, now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald.

Hence, true friendship is the least jealous of loves. For in this love, to divide is not to take away. We possess each friend not less, but more as the number of those with whom we share him increases. In this friendship exhibits a glorious nearness by resemblance to heaven itself, where the very multitude of the blessed, which no man can number, increases the fruition which each of us has of God.

This is such an important thing to realize because confusion here leads to big problems often, such as when a boy-girl romantic relationship or even a marriage becomes too exclusive in the aspect of friendship.

And often a natural friendship does develop that way into romantic love. That's the best way around. But that shouldn't lead to a jealous refusal to share the friendship that is between you.

[28 : 56] Listen to C.S. Lewis again. If one who was first, in the deep and full sense, your friend is then gradually or suddenly revealed as your lover, you will certainly not want to share the beloved's romantic love with any third.

But you'll have no jealousy at all about sharing the friendship. Nothing so enriches a romantic love as the discovery that the beloved can deeply, truly, and spontaneously enter into friendships with the friends you already had.

To feel that not only are we too united by erotic love, but we three or four or five are all travelers on the same quest and have a same common vision.

But you see, often that is not what happens, is it? And it leads to loss of friendships on both sides, and often it leads to real hurt. For example, if two friends become so romantically involved that they begin to forget about it and shut out all their other circle of friends.

And that results in a real diminishing, not only of friendship, but also of that romantic relationship. It's less than it could have been.

[30 : 07] Because sometimes there's jealousy in one partner, you see, about anything or about anyone else that seems to be competing with their love interest. Now, usually that is because one of the two partners is very insecure.

They're very fearful about losing the affection of their spouse. And at the same time, there's confusion about what should be exclusive to a marriage, that is, the sexual intimacy, and what flourishes by being inclusive, by the sharing of love, by the sharing of homes with others.

It also usually means that somebody is looking to that romance or to that marriage to be their savior, to be the answer to all of their needs in life. Actually, they're making their marriage into a God.

But friends, marriage is a God that will never deliver those kind of answers to your life. Forget it. But that kind of jealousy, that kind of desire for a total possession of the other person is what will wreck a marriage.

We need to be alert to that. It's an especially common thing and a disastrous thing in Christian ministry and service. When somebody, perhaps a wife of a minister, feels jealous in sharing their husband's time and focus and love with so many other people and can become resentful against those that they're serving.

[31 : 34] It can be terribly damaging. Here's a couple of tests about this in your own relationship. How do you feel as a husband or wife or as a dating couple?

How do you feel in company with others? Do you just wish all the time that you were together and they weren't there? Or do you thrive, actually, on sharing your friendship together as a couple with others?

That's a good test. Here's another one. Maybe you need to ask your friends, how do your friends feel being around you as a couple? Do they feel awkward?

Do they feel like a bit of a lemon all the time? Do they feel that your vibes that you're giving out are really, actually, I wish they'd clear off so we could just be ourselves? Well, you need to ask your friends that.

Those are bad signs, you see. That's why the Bible is full of commands not to be exclusive in the wrong way about our marriages or about our home lives in particular.

[32 : 34] All those commands to have open homes, to be hospitable, to do it without grumbling, to be involving others in your lives. Shared lives, shared fellowship.

And that is especially important in any church for those of us who are married or are connected to others, to think about people who are single, people who don't have, perhaps, nuclear families, or people who are single parents, or people who have been widowed, or people who are lonely, who are lack of space.

Our God is a God who sets the solitary in a home. And the truth is that our friendships and our marriages will flourish when we share them in the way God means us to share them.

Friendship is, by its nature, inclusive. But thirdly, we do need also to note that real friendship, by its nature, does create unique bonds.

And therefore, there is a sense in which, by its nature, friendship is also exclusive. And that is something, I think, that calls for both celebration and care.

[33 : 45] Despite what I've already said about the inclusive, shared nature of friendship, it's still going to be shared within a group. And so there is a certain exclusiveness that is inherent to real friendship, isn't there?

The Lord Jesus had his special 12 disciples. And within that group, he had his special three, Peter, James, and John. You read about Paul who had his inner associates in mission.

Then his special ones like Timothy, my son, he called him, like Luke, our dear friend. You have David who had his mighty men and so on. And you see, when we know something of the preciousness of deep friendships that last for many years, that bind you together, it is a cause for real celebration, for real thanksgiving.

And in Christian ministry, especially, it's invaluable. In my experience, it's essential to have a band of brothers, those who would really die in the trenches with you and for you.

But these unique bonds of Christian friends are a great gift of God, but they're also a creative thing. They're part of God's purpose for us.

[34 : 55] I think for students, particularly, your time at university can be extraordinarily formative, not least through the forging of deep and real friendships with other Christians that will last a lifetime.

But I think the same is also true of being part of any church fellowship such as ours, where there is opportunity to grow close to others as you're serving alongside them and with them, as you're sharing a common vision, a common passion.

C.S. Lewis again, for a Christian, there are, strictly speaking, no chances. A secret master of ceremonies has been at work.

Christ, who said to the disciples, you have not chosen one another, but I have chosen you, can truly say to every group of Christian friends, you have not chosen one another, but I have chosen you for one another.

The friendship is not a reward for our discrimination and good taste in finding one another out. It's the instrument by which God reveals to each the beauties of all the others.

[35 : 56] They are, like all beauties, derived from him and then in a good friendship increased by him through the friendship itself so that it's his instrument for creating as well as revealing.

You see, God gives us friendship, especially real Christian friendship, as a creative thing in order to enable us to enrich one another's lives. And that's a cause for celebration, for thanksgiving.

But you see, the preciousness of what binds us together is also by its nature that which excludes other people, isn't it? There are just natural limits, obviously, to the deep shared bonds that there are between a group of special friends.

And therefore, there also needs to be care. Care unless that kind of exclusivism, which is right and necessary and inevitable, lest it should become exclusivist.

Very easy, isn't it, in a church or in a CU or in many other situations for cliques to form that become exclusivist, where there's sort of a sharing of in-jokes and knowing looks from insiders and a bit of a cold shoulder to outsiders.

[37 : 17] Friends have to be careful. It's easy for that exclusivist pride to begin to develop in a group of friends. It's easy to see it in others' friends, not so easy to see it in yourself, in your own group.

And especially as believers, because our faith and our love for Christ necessarily separates us from others, doesn't it? Can't be otherwise, because the gospel excludes unbelief.

So we're separated. But ours must be a separation that invites in, not a separation that desires to keep out.

We're not to be like the Pharisees who shut up the gate of heaven to others. They didn't even enter it themselves. Nor are we to be people who have no thought for the outsider, either in our friendships or in our churches.

We're not to be unnecessarily exclusivist. That's Paul's point to the Corinthians, isn't it? In many places. In 1 Corinthians 14, he talks about them speaking in tongues.

[38 : 21] It was making outsiders and even some insiders feel excluded. So it's wrong, says Paul. So we must be careful in case these blessed bonds of friendship that God gives us and which we celebrate and give thanks for, lest they should give rise to pride.

But we can celebrate the deep and the precious bonds that so enrich our lives in the friends that God gives us. Well, what about then explicit wisdom from the Bible about the demands and about the responsibilities of real friendship?

Let me suggest three things in this last point. That real fellowship, according to the Bible, real friendship requires constancy and candor and Christ-likeness.

I just finished my preparation. I was trying to see if I had any good books that I could recommend on the theme of friendship and I couldn't think of any and then under a great pile of stuff on my desk, I find a copy of a little book which is quite new, I don't know where I got it, by Vaughan Roberts on friendship.

And so I quickly read through it and I was very pleased to see that we're saying a lot of the same things and quoting a lot of the same C.S. Lewis and I was extremely impressed to see that he had six C's for friendship.

[39 : 39] Well, I've only got three and they're not quite the same so if you want some more, read Vaughan Roberts' little book. It's very good indeed. But we have in the book of Proverbs particularly some real wisdom and insight of things that are true, I think, for all friendships but especially for believers.

So here's the first. Real friendship means constancy and commitment. especially when friends are in pain and suffering.

Proverbs 17, verse 17, a friend loves at all times, a brother is born for adversity. Proverbs 18, verse 24, a man of many companions may come to ruin but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

And that constancy is what marks true friendship in stark contrast to the false or failed friends that Proverbs also speaks of.

Don't look it up but Proverbs 19, verse 4, wealth brings many friends but a poor man is deserted by his friends. Or verse 9, many seek the favor of a generous man and everyone is the friend of a man who gives gifts.

[40 : 49] But it is not the good times but the bad that show us how our true friends really are. Now there's many biblical examples, aren't there, of what those times can be.

It can be times when you find yourself out of favor in Christian circles as Paul was when he was imprisoned. It's astonishing that 2 Timothy, verse 1, tells us that he had been deserted by all in Asia.

Every church where he had converted them and served them and teach them had turned their back on Paul when he was persona non grata because he was imprisoned. But, says Paul, on a Ziphorus, was unashamed of my chains.

Unashamed of a man who was under opprobrium for his faithfulness to the gospel. And on a Ziphorus name is known all over the world today written scripture because he was a real friend to Paul.

That's real friendship when people are out of favor in Christian circles. And some of us know a little bit about that and we give thanks for the constancy of many true and real friends.

[42 : 03] It can be a need for constancy when friends are cast down or exhausted or discouraged. I always think that God put Priscilla and Aquila into the city of Corinth just so that they were there to refresh Paul in the midst of a difficult and arduous and a discouraging missionary journey.

People have his own trade there that he became such deep friends with. And it's not easy is it to support friends when they're really discouraged.

It's very hard sometimes to support friends perhaps when they're deeply distressed and even ill with it with depression. It's very easy to drop those friends to move on but a real friend is constant.

A brother is born for adversity. Sometimes it's help in times of physical danger and loss. Paul tells us in Romans 16 that Priscilla and Aquila risked their necks for me he says.

Risked their own lives. That's a real test of friendship isn't it? I wonder how constant we really are as friends or whether sometimes we're rather mercenary as those other proverbs suggest.

[43 : 16] A poor man's friends go far from him. He pursues them with pleading but they're nowhere to be found. Proverbs 19 verse 7 Sometimes it's when a friend seems to desert the Lord altogether.

Maybe it's in despair at something that they've done. Job says, doesn't he, a despairing man should have the devotion of his friends even though he forsakes the fear of the almighty.

Job 6 verse 14 That was the most unthinkable thing possible in the Bible. Apostasy from God but real friends says Job remain devoted even then.

How much more as Paul says in Galatians 6 verse 1 when someone is caught in a sin should real friends be involved to help restore them gently.

Constancy. Real friends will be there when the chips are down. Whatever. Yet not like Job's friend. Not making a great show of their faithfulness.

[44 : 20] Making a great show of needing to be needed. Perhaps even secretly reveling in the sort of status it gives them. No, as C.S. Lewis says, the mark of perfect friendship is not that help will be given when the pinch comes.

Of course it will. But that having been given it makes no difference at all. It was a distraction. It was anomaly. It's just forgotten. It's nothing. There's no sense of making someone feel a sense of obligation and debt to your friendship.

It's just what real friends do, isn't it? Constantly. I hope that describes our Christian friendships. Not always so. Do you know, a friend of mine who spent a long time in prison once said to me that he found more loyalty and friendship among fellow prisoners in prison than he found in the church in which he was working.

How's that? That's pretty damning, isn't it? Real friendship, according to the Bible, demands constancy with commitment, especially to friends who are in pain.

And it demands, says the Bible, candor. But candor with care in being willing to bring pain to a friend.

[45 : 35] Proverbs 27, verse 6, Faithful are the wounds of a friend. Profuse are the kisses of an enemy. And verse 9, Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from earnest counsel.

Even that is when the earnest counsel is not what you particularly wanted to hear. It can hurt, can't it, to be honest. But sometimes a real friend must speak truth that causes pain in order to save a friend from worse pain and even from danger.

I mean, if you discover that your best friend's wife is having an affair and that she is planning to murder your friend and run off with insurance money with her lover, you don't say, well, I'm not going to tell him because it will be so devastating for him.

It's ludicrous. Sometimes a real friend in order to be faithful must inflict wounds, like God does. I wound and I heal.

But you see, we need great care, great care because we're not God. That's the problem, isn't it? And not every home truth is ours to convey to somebody.

[46 : 52] There's a time to speak, but there's a time to be silent. And he gave him over saying last Sunday night, there are some things which though truthful should not be said. There's a time to speak and there's a way to speak.

The Lord Jesus knew how to wound and how to heal. But a bruised reed, he never crushed a smoking flax, he never quenched.

He had perfect sensitivity. And of course the trouble is we do not. And nor are we infallible. So we need great care. Faithful wounds are not inflicted frivolously or foolishly or I think without long, hard, heart searching.

Or else great damage can be done. When I was at university there was a group of ultra-pious students in the Christian Union and they championed something that they called confrontational friendship. And there was a lot of pious talk about genuine honesty, about sin and so on.

But the reality was there were just a bunch of proud, very self-righteous, very naive and immature, silly people. And predictably a huge amount of relational damage was done.

[48 : 07] As they went around, mercilessly attacking all their friends for every tiny little fault. Those are not faithful wounds. Of course, there is the opposite danger, isn't there, that we ignore and we pretend away all sorts of damaging faults and behavior in our friends.

We just turn a blind eye because it's too hard for us to confront. And the consequences of that can be equally disastrous for our friends.

Just read the beginning of the book of 1 Kings. You see how David's failure to confront the wrongdoing in his sons, Adonijah and then Absalom, led to disaster for his family, indeed for the whole nation.

But real friendship does demand candor with care. A good test, I think, of a right attitude of candor with care is to ask yourself, do you in any way feel an eagerness to correct your friend on this matter?

Do you in any way feel rather satisfied confronting your friend about something? If you do, then you are probably not the person to speak to them, or it's not the time. But if you find yourself agonizing about it, desperate to do anything other than talk to your friend, longing that somebody else would do this, well then very probably now is the time and you are the person.

[49 : 27] God is laying that burden of responsibility upon you. I always think of the conversation repeatedly between Murray McChain when he asked Andrew Boner what he'd been preaching on the previous Sunday and Andrew Boner said, I was preaching on hell.

And McChain said to him, and did you preach it with tears? The real friendship demands candor with care. And very often that care means tears, deep heart searching.

And real friendship demands Christ-likeness with cost, in bearing pain, with friends and for friends and also sadly from friends.

True Christian friendship is cruciform, that is it is cross-shaped. It is shaped by the cross also. And it shares and it reflects the friendship of Christ himself.

Now, do not misunderstand me here. There is a wholly wrong way of thinking of our friendship as Christ-like. In that we can sometimes think that we as friends have to, or even think we're capable of fixing everything for our friends.

[50 : 42] When something needs fixing. When they're in a mess, when they're ill, when they're very depressed, or whatever it might be. But let me say, that's not what I'm talking about.

There's a refrain in a book that we're reading with the pastor's training course, man, a very helpful book, and it keeps coming back to this, and it says, remember, we are not the Christ.

Just as we mustn't seek our salvation from friendships, or relationships, or marriages, we can't provide salvation for others in these relationships either. We are not the Christ. One of my most quoted quotes to ministers in training, and to myself regularly, comes from William Still's little book, *The Work of the Pastor*, where he says this, some meddling ministers want to sort everybody out.

God is not so optimistic. God is not so optimistic. You cannot fix everything in your friends' lives. And Christian doesn't mean, Christian friendship doesn't mean that we can do all of these things. We can't. We are not the Christ. But Christ-like friendship does, I think, mean that our love for our friends will often have to bear many things with them, and even bear a lot of pain from them, from those that we call friends or have once called friends.

[52 : 09] Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, real love is patient and kind. Love bears all things. Love endures all things.

Love never ends. And bearing pain is a big part of the cruciform cost of real friendship. Because as with so many things, the things and the people that can give us the highest pleasure and happiness in life are also able to inflict on us the greatest pain.

And so often that does mean our closest friends and family. We know that to be true, don't we? And real friendship and love involves a giving of ourselves that makes us vulnerable.

Vulnerable to hurt, deep hurt. And the truth is, friends, isn't it, that often our deepest hurts in our Christian walk and in our Christian service come from other Christians.

People that we've been close with and deep with and friends with. Even people that we've been closely at work with side by side as colleagues in Christian service and ministry. Just read the Psalms.

[53 : 20] All my enemies whisper together against me. Even my close friend who shared my bread has lifted up his heel against me. Psalm 41. Or Psalm 55.

If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it. If a foe were raising himself against me, I could hide from him. But it's you, my companion, my close friend with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with a throng to the house of God.

It's shocking, isn't it, to read that? But we know it's true. And especially in Christian life and in service, the deepest wounds, the deepest hurts will often be inflicted by those who we've been so close with as fellow believers and friends.

Because they're capable, aren't they, of making our wounds so much more painful. You see, the great danger is that having been hurt like that, we will in the future want to protect ourselves.

We feel unable to give ourselves in that way again, that way to anybody in any relationship, in any ministry, in any service, lest the same thing happen again. I gave them everything.

[54 : 33] I gave them my all and look, look what's happened to me. Look what they've done. I can never let that happen again. It's natural, isn't it? But we need to beware.

That natural tendency to self-preservation, to self-protection will lead. If we don't arrest it, it will lead to a growing coldness and hardness and bitterness in our hearts that will become ultimately irrecoverable.

C.S. Lewis, one last time, even if it were granted that insurances against heartbreak were our highest wisdom, does God himself offer them? Apparently not.

Christ himself comes to say at last, why have you forsaken me? There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be run and very possibly be broken.

If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries. Avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness.

[55 : 45] But, in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change.

It will not be broken. It will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation.

The only place outside of heaven when you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is hell. See, where there is real friendship and real love, there must be the risk of pain and heartbreak.

And in this world of fallen humanity, friends, that risk, let me tell you, is a virtual certainty. But it's not all negative.

And for believers, there is another dimension altogether in this Christ-shaped friendship and love.

That is that we must never forget the great principle of resurrection, of new life that comes through suffering and death.

[56 : 57] We shall draw near to God, not by trying to avoid the sufferings inherent in all loves, says Lewis, but by accepting them and offering them to him, turning away all defensive armor.

See, sometimes our hearts are broken for a reason. That's the nature of God's strange but merciful providence. Sometimes it's because we will draw nearer to Christ through that than would be possible any other way.

It's a path that just has to be for our life. Christ-likeness with cost in all our life and in all our friendships too.

That's the way of the cross, isn't it? That's the way of discipleship. And it's the way of witness to what true friendship really is. Both to our fellow believers and to a world that is watching, watching the church of Jesus Christ.

The supreme character of real friends is that we bear all things, that we love one another, that we forgive one another, and that we go on loving one another without counting the cost.

[58 : 14] Now, I am sure that we all long for these kind of friendships. Well, I think the Bible says to us, don't bemoan your lack of such friends.

Determine instead to be such a friend to many. Be a friend marked by real constancy with commitment, by candor with real care, and by Christ-likeness with real cost.

Proverbs 22, verse 11 says, He who loves purity of heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king as his friend. So attractive will he be to others.

I have called you friends, said Jesus. And this is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you, as I have friended you.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, how we praise and thank you for the friendship that you have shown to us in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us, we pray, in being a people seeking love outside of ourselves for love's sake, not only for our own, to be a people who exhibit the glorious friendship of Christ in our lives to one another and to this world.

[59 : 40] We may shine, that many might see his love and ours and bring glory to our Father in heaven. For we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.