

Choosing the Right Friends

Introduction:

In Mark the second chapter, we have recorded for us one of the greatest examples of faith ever demonstrated. Jesus at this time was performing miracles in Galilee. He healed a man of leprosy and told him not to tell anyone about it but instead the man went out and spoke of it freely. As a result Jesus could not enter into town for a while but was forced to work in desolated places. When things died down a little bit, Jesus entered a house in Capernaum, probably the house of Peter (**ver. 1**). He wasn't there long before news leaked out about where He was and before you knew there was a full house. There were so many people at this house to where even the doorway was over crowded to the point where it couldn't be approached.

With a full house on hand **Ver. 2** tells us that Jesus was "*preaching the word to them.*" Apart from dying on the cross this was the most important thing that Jesus did during His personal ministry. Jesus wasn't on earth to make friends or to become popular with the people, though he was at this time very popular. Jesus was here to preach the word and so with a full house on hand this is what Jesus did.

Now, while Jesus was preaching to the people, four men brought a friend of theirs who was a paralytic lying on a portable pallet. When they had heard that Jesus was at this house, they knew immediately that He could heal their friend and so they set out to get him to Jesus. The problem was, when they got to the house they discovered that there were so many people there that they couldn't get anywhere near Him. This is when these four men did something amazing that demonstrated their remarkable faith in Jesus and that grabbed His attention immediately. Since they couldn't get their friend to Jesus through the front door, they carried him up the outer stairs that led to the roof, removed a portion of the roof and lowered their friend, pallet and all, to Jesus. Now I'll not get into the details but in order to do that these men had to tear a good size opening in the roof of someone else's house, risking their own safety in more ways than one, all because they had no doubt whatsoever that if they could just get their friend to Jesus, his life would be changed forever.

And changed it was, but not as they expected, at least not at first. They expected Jesus to heal him of his paralysis and in the end Jesus did just that, but first there was a more pressing issue. An issue that is more important than any other. An issue that Jesus cared more about than restoring strength in a man's legs or sight in a man's eyes. I'm talking about the forgiveness of sins. This paralytic man wanted to be healed physically. His friends wanted him to be healed physically, but Jesus knew that the most important thing was that he be healed spiritually. So the first thing Jesus did when He perceived that these were men of great faith was to say to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven" (**ver. 5**).

Now, in this full house were a few scribes and Pharisees who were immediately offended by these words from Jesus and they thought to themselves, “*Why does this man speak like this? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?*” (2:7). Well Jesus, being the Son of man, knew exactly what they were thinking and so He asked them a question. “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk?’” (ver. 9). Well, if these men are going to be honest, they would have to admit that saying, “your sins are forgiven” would be just as easy as saying, “...take up your bed and walk?” Really it would all come down to authority. Now the difference in these cases would be in the visible evidence. Forgiveness of sins doesn’t come with any visual manifestation. So then, how could one know that this man’s sins were really forgiven when Jesus said it? If it could be proven that Jesus had the authority to forgive sins then they all could know. But how could such be proven? It could be proven by Jesus healing the paralytic. To show power in the one would demonstrate authority in the other because it would confirm that His word was true. So then, Jesus proceeds to heal the paralytic man and amaze the house full of witnesses (vers. 11-12).

There are many directions we could with this text with regard to practical application. Certainly we could spend our time emphasizing the deity of Christ that is accentuated by His ability to forgive sins. We could preach various lessons on the power of personal faith and the importance of it. However, my main focus is going to be on “***Choosing the Right Friends.***”

Dr. Wilfred Funk, the dictionary publisher, was asked to list the 10 most expressive words in the English language. Here are four that jumped out at me:

The most revered word -- mother
The most beautiful word -- love
The most bitter word -- alone
The warmest word -- FRIENDSHIP

The importance of having good friends cannot be overstated. The man found in Mark two experienced the forgiveness of sins because he had friends who brought him to Jesus. At some point in his life he chose the right friends. Let me ask you, “What kind of allies do you have?” “Who are your closest companions in life?” Ladies and gentlemen, the kind of friends you have matters.

Prov 12:26 NIV

26 A righteous man is cautious in friendship, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.

Prov 13:20 NKJV

20 He who walks with wise men will be wise, But the companion of fools will be destroyed.

Lesson:

Friends can either build us up or tear us down both physically and spiritually. So for the rest of our time I want to talk to you about two kinds of friends.

I. Fatal Friends

Let me begin by saying that as Christians God is our center. Everything we are about should revolve around God. The recreation we choose, the clothes we wear, the language we use, the way we spend our time, how we treat other people, should all reflect the God that we serve. We should like what God likes and abhor what God abhors. We should work the works of God, walk in the ways of God and abide in the will of God. The point of it is this: just like the sun is the center of our solar system, God should be the center of our lives. Jesus said, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness..."

Now, what does all this have to do with the kind of friends that we choose? As Christians, a fatal friend to us is one that prevents us in any way from seeking the rule of God first in our lives. Fatal friends have many different characteristics, but so far as Christians are concerned, the first sign that one is a fatal friend is that he or she somehow, in some way, stops us from working the works of God, walking in the ways of God and abiding in the will of God. A fatal friend for us as children of God is the person who impedes the progress of our spirituality and therefore negatively affects our relationship with God. It doesn't matter how nice this friend is. It doesn't matter how long we have known this friend. It doesn't matter how much good this friend does for us in other walks of life, if he or she hurts our Christianity in any way, they become fatal friends. Do you remember the warning of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:33?

1 Cor 15:33

33 Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." ESV

Whenever Paul says "do not be deceived" you know that someone is being deceived. These are usually troubled areas where people are living self-delusionary lives. When it comes to bad company ruining good morals, someone says, "No, no, no, I'm too strong for that to happen to me." Paul said, "Do not be deceived..." "Oh," someone says, "I'm going to have a greater influence on the company I keep than the company is going to have with me." Paul said, "Do not be deceived." When you align yourself with associates that do not love God like you do and do not care about spiritual things the way you care about them, they are going ultimately tear you down, not build you up.

2 Corinthians 6:14 (ESV)

14 Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?

The words “unequally yoked” come from two Greek words. Heteros (ἕτερος), which means “different” and zygos (ζυγός) which means “to join, especially by a yoke” and then “a coupling.” Now, the first clear implication of these words is that the believer and the unbeliever are different, and some things are so different that joining them together becomes, not only nonsensical, but potentially disastrous. Paul is borrowing his thought here from Deut. 22:10 where the Bible says, “*You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together.*” Why? Because it is impossible for those two animals to work together. Their strength, size and even their very nature is so different that there is no way they could successfully plow a field together. If one tried to yoke an ox and a donkey together the end result would be dreadful. Now what do you think will become of the Christian who tries to plow through life yoked to one who is unrighteous and who loves darkness more than the light? The end result will be messy. Consider what else Paul says in 2 Cor. 6 (**vers. 15-17**). God is emphasizing separation for His people. He is not talking about forming a cultic community where we have no contact with outsiders, but He is saying that He doesn’t want us to become chums with sin or those who walk in it. He doesn’t even want us to give in to curiosity and touch that which is unclean. This reminds us of the command He gave to Adam and Eve, doesn’t it. Satan said, “*Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?*” 2 And the woman said to the serpent, “*We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, 3 but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die'”* (Gen 3:1-3). Listen to me: God knows the power of allurements and temptation and He is setting up a road block for us. He knew that if Adam or Eve touch the forbidden fruit, they would give in to its attraction and He knows that if we put ourselves in temptations path, we will give as well. Consider the man of Proverbs 7 who gave in to the prostitute who seduced him (**Prov. 7:6-23**). What a picture here of a naive young man who simply caved in to the powers of a seductress, but the truth is, he put himself in a precarious position by passing along the street near her corner and then taking the road to her house. That was a foolish thing for him to do and in the end it cost him his life. Now we can make the same mistake that he made. How? We do it by flirting with sin because we simply don’t respect its alluring power. And one way we flirt with sin is by the company that we keep. We develop fatal friendships with those of the world that are different than we are and more times than not it leads to a ruinous end like trying to plow a field with an ox and donkey. And so God says to us, “Separate yourselves and touch not the unclean thing.” This is the constant and consistent admonition of the Word of God.

Blessed is the man that walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful (Psalm 1:1).

Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men (Proverbs 4:14).

Be not thou envious against evil men, neither desire to be with them (Proverbs 24:1).

If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: 11 For he that bids him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds (2 John 1:10-11).

This last passage brings us back to 1 Corinthians 15:33. Why? Because when Paul warns that *“bad company ruins good morals,”* he was dealing with a doctrinal issue (the resurrection). It is not just those who are ungodly and immoral that we should avoid associating with, but also those who are submerged in false doctrine.

So then, if the person is a detriment to our spirituality, we shouldn't choose that person as a friend. We must avoid fatal friends. Still we all need friends don't we?

Socrates said; "there is no possession more valuable than a good and faithful friend."

Francis Bacon said, "friendship doubles joys and halves grief's..."

Mark Twain said; "to get the full value out of joy, you must have someone to divide it with..."

God says; "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down his friend can help him help. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! " (Ecc. 4:9-10).

So, let's turn our talk from fatal friends to faithful friends, the kind of friends that we should choose in life.

II. Faithful Friends

Since we emphasized that fact that those who in any way hinder our relationship with God are fatal friends that we should avoid, it is only right to start this portion of the sermon by emphasizing that a faithful friend is first the one who helps our relationship with God. Remember the friends of the paralytic man in Mark two? They did everything they could do to get their friend to Jesus. The circumstances were not favorable, but that didn't deter them. People stood in their way but that didn't dissuade them. The obstacles were real and to some would make the task seem impossible, but that didn't discourage them. These friends had one thing in mind, that is, to get their friend to Jesus so they conquered the circumstances, they prevailed against the people and they obliterated the obstacles and they got their friends to Jesus. Let me tell you brethren, that is the kind of friend I want to have.

A friend that will help me draw closer to Jesus. I may not need friends to lower me down through a roof, but I do need friends who will help me lower myself when pride overtakes me. I may not need friends to bear me up on a portable

pallet, but I do need friends that will help bear my burdens when they are hindering my relationship with Jesus. I may not need friends who will go out of their way geographical to get me close to the Lord, but I do need friends who will go out of their way to rebuke me when I sin, to reprove me when I take the wrong path and admonish me when I lose my way. You see, I don't need friends to get me to Jesus because I'm already there; I need friends who will help me stay with Jesus and all of us who are in Christ right now need these kind of friends. Friends who will help us, not hinder us. Friends who encourage us, not discourage us. Friends who will motivate us by their lives, move us by their love and make a difference in our lives by their faithful living. Do you know who had some friends like that? Paul.

Paul was one of the greatest Christians that ever lived, not simply because he was a good apostle, but because of the life that he lived. Christianity, ladies and gentlemen, is about living. Being a child of God is about being born again, being a Christian is about living for Jesus after one is born again, and the truth is no one has ever lived for Jesus any better than Paul. As a result Paul has had more of an impact, both through his life and through his inspired writings, on the church than anyone else, except, of course, Jesus Himself. But one thing that is clear through the writings of Paul themselves is that Paul didn't act alone. He surrounded himself with good and faithful friends that contributed much to the overall success that he, by the grace of God, enjoyed. We learn of some of Paul's friends by the final greetings that we find at the end of some of his epistles. Let's consider first his final greetings to the brethren at Colossae (**Col. 4:7-18**).

- *Tychicus (A friend who serves God)*

7 Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord.

This was a good friend for Paul to have and we need these kind of friends too. Not only was Tychicus beloved by brethren, he was an active member of the Lord's church. Paul called him a faithful minister and a fellow servant. Let me tell you, ladies and gentlemen, servitude is contagious. If you are constantly around a brother or sister who is focused on serving God and you yourself have a desire to do what is right, the behavior of the active member will rub off on you. Now let me be honest with you. Being around an active church member won't do much for you if you're lazy, lackadaisical or spiritually lethargic. But if you already active in the Lord, your spiritual activity will only increase when you surround yourself with friends who are busy serving the Lord. This is especially true with members like Tychicus who are willing to do whatever for the Lord. Tychicus didn't have visions of person grandeur in the Lord, he just wanted to serve in any capacity he could. In every reference we have of him, he is basically Paul's messenger boy, but the messages he delivered are a part the inspired word of God that we have today. But the point of it is this—when we are

around workers for the Lord, it has a tendency to make us work. When we are around those who serve, we want to serve. We have seen that bad company corrupts good morals. If such is the case and we know that it is, then what does good company do? We know the answer don't we? Good company strengthens our morals. So these are the kind of friends we should choose.

- *Onesimus (A friend who was converted)*

9 and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.

Onesimus was Philemon's slave who had run away and ran into Paul at Rome. Paul converted him and now he is a faithful member of the Lord's church. We don't know a whole lot about Onesimus. All we have about him is found here and in the short letter to Philemon. We do know that he wasn't a good person before his conversion. Paul calls him useless or unprofitable in Philemon 1:11 and implies that he had done damage to Philemon before he ran away. But Onesimus was converted and his conversion wasn't just an act. Paul now calls him a faithful and beloved brother and the proof of his conversion is seen in that he now returns to Philemon with the letter that bears his name.

What kind of friends should we choose to have? What kind of associates should we align ourselves with as we strive to serve and please God? Well, I'll tell you. It is not with those who have a perfect past. It is not with those who have never made any mistakes and can't wait for you to know it. No, we need friends who have truly been converted. We need friends who have learned from their past mistakes and can now pass some of that knowledge on to us. There is something to be learned from the brother who has spent some dark days in drunkenness. There is something to be learned from the brother or sister who has been imprisoned because of past transgressions. There is something to be learned from the fellow-servant in Christ who was once caught up in an extra-marital affair.

Michael Vick is a NFL quarterback who had everything going for him until his life came crumbling down due to being charged with operating a dog-fighting ring. Something funny happened to Vick though, as he sat in a jail cell for almost two years (23 months). He grew up. He started thinking like a man instead of a boy from the hood. Vick recently address a crop of NFL rookies in the annual rookie symposium. His words are the words of a man who has been converted from a place of recklessness to a position of responsibility.

"As I sat in a prison cell, I understood why I was in there. That's bad. You don't want to end up that way. True story: I could see it all coming. I could see it happening. I thought about it. I asked myself, 'Should I stop doing what I was doing?' And I didn't stop. That's having no discipline."

"The best thing for me to do was going to prison, being able to separate myself. I wasn't strong enough to get away from them. I wasn't strong enough to say, 'We're not going this direction. I ain't living like this no more. We can't condone this type of activity.' I wasn't strong enough. I needed the legal system to say, 'You all can't be around each other anymore.' That's the situation I created."

"I'm a firm believer in God...if you don't appreciate what God gave you and the position that you're in, he'll take that away from you. And he took it away from me."

Michael Vick is not a Christian but he learned from his past and now is in position to help others. There are Christians who have a lot to offer, not just because of their service now, but because of a not-so-good past that God has delivered them from and now they are in position to help. Onesimus was Paul's friend and Paul would be the first one to tell you that he was profitable to him.

- Aristarchus (A friend who was consistent)

10 Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you...

Aristarchus was a consistent friend. He was with Paul during difficult times and never abandoned him. He was the kind of friend that was willing to endure through tough times. He was with Paul in Ephesus when a riot broke out and got caught up in the middle of it. He was with Paul on a ship when the ship wrecked in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. And now we find him with Paul in prison at Rome. Someone might say that Aristarchus didn't choose his friends very well. No, the fact is he was just a loyal friend. Do you want to know another fatal friend that we didn't mention a while ago? It is a fair-weather friend. There are friends that stick with you as long as everything in your life is smooth, but the moment a storm blows in and it looks like they might get a little wet, they bail out. Now, you may not know the true color of those friends until they bail, but when they do, don't lose any sleep because they weren't true friends anyway.

Aristarchus reminds me once again of the friends of the paralytic. The KJV uses the word *palsy* to describe the paralytic man. Now while today we know that this has to do with damage of the brain and therefore is not transmittable by touch, in the first century many believed that it was contagious. Yet this man had four friends who loved him enough that they didn't care about the perceived danger involved in sticking by their friend. And while I wouldn't be dogmatic about this point the text gives some indication that this man's condition was brought on by his personal sin and commentators are pretty much unity in this conclusion. Now, while I'm not totally convinced of this, it is certainly possible, maybe even probable. If such was the case, here is a man that brought on some problems upon himself, yet his friends didn't say, "This is your fault, we are not going to help you." No these friends were true. These friends were consistent. These friends were friends in good time and in bad. This was the kind of friend that

Aristarchus was and these are the kind of friends we need to surround ourselves with today.

- *Mark (A friend who doesn't hold grudges)*

10 ...and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions— if he comes to you, welcome him),

The interesting thing about this friend of Paul's is their rocky history. This is the same Mark who was with Paul during his first missionary journey but who didn't finish the trip. While we are not told in scripture why he didn't finish the trip, it is pretty clear that Paul believed that he had quit and refused to go with him on a second trip (**Acts 15:37-40**). However, at some point these two brethren did what we should all do when personal problems and differences arise among us, that is, they worked it out. Now Paul has a renewed confidence in Mark (**2 Tim. 4:11**). Now, almost everything you read on this praises Paul for his spirit of forgiveness and his willingness to give Mark a second chance. Such is certainly fair and reasonable commendation. But I think Mark deserves some credit too. It had to be hard for Mark when he was spurned by Paul. I'm sure that he felt he had a justifiable reason for returning to Jerusalem when he did. But in the end, he swallowed his pride, accepted responsibility for what he had done and didn't allow it to affect his relationship towards Paul. That's the quality of a good friend. Two things that destroy friendships are grudge-holding and pettiness. Those not only are relationship stoppers, but they are hard to deal with as well. Having friends that are so petty that they keep bringing up old mistakes or problems is stressful and irritating. We need friends like Mark who are willing to let go of the past and move on. We need friends who are willing to forgive and forget and treat us the same after an incident occurs as they did before it happened. Mark was such a friend to Paul and in the end they both benefitted from it.

- *Justus (A friend who comforts)*

11 and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.

This is the only reference to this man that we have in scripture so this is all we know about him. Jesus was his Jewish name and Justus was his Roman name. It is much like the names Saul and Paul. He, as well as the other men mentioned in this text, was a great comfort to Paul. We need friends who comfort us when the hassles of life begin to seem overwhelming. But the comfort that Paul speaks of here was more than his own personal comfort, that is, physically speaking. In other places, he talks about all the physical struggles that he had gone through – shipwrecks, beatings, in prisonments, going hungry. And he said that he had learned to be content whatever the circumstances. No, Paul's great concern was for the salvation of other people, both Jews and Gentiles. It was through the concern and work that Justus showed toward the end of bringing

people to Jesus that brought comfort to his heart. He knew that he was not alone in the work, and he knew that when he died, the work would continue on for men like Justus were great workers in the kingdom of God. We don't need friends who will talk about working in the kingdom. We don't need friends who we let us do all the work. We need friends who are fellow workers and who comfort us because of their commitment to the God that we ourselves serve.

- *Epaphras (A friend who prays)*

12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.

Epaphras was a friend who prayed. We need friends who pray for us. The prayers of the righteous avails much.

- *Luke (A friend who is tireless)*

14 Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas.

Luke was a tireless workers, being with Paul during both his second and third missionary journeys and Demas, well Demas was the only disappointment in this list. He ultimately left the Lord because he loved this present world (**2 Tim. 4:10**).

- *Paul (A friend that holds you accountable).*

17 And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord."

I know that the men mentioned in this text were friends of Paul, but Paul proved himself to be an exceptional friend. One thing that is emphasized in ver. 17 is that Paul kept his friends accountable for their actions. We need friends today who are going to challenge us and keep us on the right track by holding us accountable for the words we speak and for the lives that we live.

Conclusion:

So, these are the kind of friends that we need. These are the kind of friends that can help us stay on the right track in the kingdom of God. Friends who help enhance our relationship with Jesus and who help us draw closer to God and nearer to heaven. Let's choose our friends well.