

Study Guide: Friendship with God

Sunday, September 12, 2021 | Greg Boyd

Topic: Relationships, Grace

Focus Scripture:

Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay 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 have heard from my Father I have made known to you. — John 15: 13-16

Short Summary:

God has invited us to be his friends, but what does that actually mean? And how is being God's friend actually a more mature relationship than being his servant? This sermon addresses these questions and challenges our common notions of friendship with God.

Extended Summary:

Those of us who live in "Western culture" are experiencing what some call "an epidemic of loneliness." For instance, nearly half of people in England over 65 say TV is their "main company." In 2021, 46% Americans reported that they feel lonely often or always. Or consider the fact that 42% of millennial women are more afraid of loneliness than a cancer diagnosis, by far the highest share of any generation.

This problem is actually exacerbated by social media, where we have a ton of acquaintances, but we don't have any true friends. It's an experience of Proverbs 18:24 which reads: "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." We have lost the art of cultivating friendships, an issue that can also have an impact upon our physical state.

We are made for friendship with one another with God. This is founded in the focus scripture quoted above. To talk about our friendship with God, Greg raises a question and makes two observations:

Question: Why is friendship with God connected to doing what Jesus commands? This does not sound very "friendly." This sounds like a master/servant relationship, but Jesus contrasts being a "friend" with being a "servant." In addition, we are saved and made friends of God by grace, not works. The answer is pretty straightforward, but requires a brief lesson in Greek grammar. In Greek, as in English, "if" can serve as a *conditional* clause, or it can serve as a *descriptive* clause. This is a descriptive use of the word "if." Jesus was not saying "you're my friends *on the condition* that you comply with my commands." He's rather saying, "Obeying my commands" describes what friendship with Jesus looks like. In other words, our obedience flows *out of* our friendship with Jesus.

Observation #1: Jesus contrasts being a servant with being a friend, which means that a friend is allowed on the inside of what the master is doing, something that a servant

does not get to know. Jesus invites the disciples in on the “inside” of the Father’s plans, and therefore they are friends.

Observation #2: A friendship relationship with Jesus reflects a deeper, more mature relationship than having a servant relationship. However, we do not tend to think this way. We actually see friendship with God as something that belongs in children’s sermons, but when we grow up we are to become a committed servant of God. We see this in various passages in the Old Testament. For instance,

**Hosea 2:18 In that day,” declares the Lord,
“you will call me ‘my husband’;
you will no longer call me ‘my master.**

At this time, God’s relationship with Israel was primarily that of a Master to a servant. God referred to Israel as his bride and to himself as Israel’s husband, but the people were not ready for it yet. Their spiritual condition was such that they always tended to see God along the lines of other deities who lorded over their people as masters.

God was dreaming of a future time when his people will have matured enough to set aside the servant mindset and enter into a love relationship with him. In Jesus, we are beginning to see this dream in Hosea. This doesn’t mean that we no longer aim at serving Jesus and the Kingdom, but our motivation to serve is no longer that of a servant blindly obeying his master. Our motivation for obeying Jesus is that *he is our friend*.

We see this illustrated in Paul’s word to the church at Corinth, which reads: “If we are ‘out of our mind,’ as some say, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again....God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.” (2 Corinthians 5: 13-15, 19-20)

Paul was willing to give up his cushy life and undergo all the hardships that went along with being a church planter in the first century because he was *compelled* by Christ’s love. Paul was motivated by his loving friendship with Jesus, not by a need to earn friendship with Jesus. God has given to us, his friends, the call to be God’s ambassadors. As his friends, God shares with us his business so we can partner with him to bring about his will on Earth as it is in heaven

In Christ, God becomes our friend, which reframes everything. Jesus is Lord of all, but we must always remember that the one who is Lord of all is also the one who is first and foremost *your friend*. We are friends of the King. Our God runs the universe, but he is also our friend with whom we share an intimate relationship.

Reflection Questions:

- What does it mean to be God's friend?
- What's the difference between being God's friend and being his servant?
- What occurs if you only relate to God as a servant?
- What does being God's friend look like in practical terms for your life?
- What changes do you need to make in order to experience God as a friend?