

Study Guide: What Happened to Spiritual Friendship?

Sunday, September 19, 2021 | Greg Boyd

Focus Scripture: I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. —2 Sam. 1:26

Topics: Community, Love

Short Summary:

Historically, intimate friendship was valued in the church and in the broader culture. This sermon provides a basic overview of why spiritual friendship is so important and why we need to build it into our lives today.

Extended Summary:

This sermon provides a historical understanding of how “friendship” has changed over time so that we can see how it has been lost and how we need to recover the practice of spiritual friendship. Greg begins by taking us back to the philosophers of old, including Plato, Aristotle and Cicero. These ancient thinkers valued friendship the way we tend to view romantic love today, as the experience that makes life worth living. This view held until the 17th and 18th centuries.

For instance, Aristotle wrote:

- “Misfortune shows those who are not really friends.”
- “Without friends, no one would want to live, even if he had all other goods.”
- “Wishing to be friends is quick work, but friendship is a slow ripening fruit.”
- “What is a friend? A single soul dwelling in two bodies.”
- “A friendship that ends was never a true friendship “

Aristotle observed that there are three types of friends. First there are friends for pleasure and entertainment. The second type of friends are those who are purposeful, like those on a sports team or co-workers. The third kind are friends of virtue, those who love each other as persons. For Aristotle, virtue friendship is the foundation of other virtues because these friends care about each other enough to want to help them to be the best selves they can be.

The church took over Aristotle’s three categories of friends, as virtue friendship came to be known as “spiritual friendships.” They even had official covenant ceremonies where friends bound themselves together. These spiritual friendships were modeled by the relationship between David and Jonathan. David said of Jonathan after he died,

I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
greatly beloved were you to me;

your love to me was wonderful,
passing the love of women. —2 Sam. 1:26

We need one to four spiritual friends in our lives who can walk with us to inspire us and to challenge us to be the kind of person that God has called us to be. We cannot live this life alone, without others who know us and point us in the right direction. We are made to be known and loved as we are.

In our culture, such friendships are uncommon. They are considered nice but nonessential. If we are going to move in this direction, we must be intentional because we are pushing against cultural trends that belittle committed spiritual friendships. This means that we will need to take specific steps toward forming spiritual friends.

Reflection Questions:

- What are the three kinds of friendships that Aristotle named? How do you see these operating in your life?
- What is spiritual friendship? Have you ever experienced it?
- What are the benefits to spiritual friendship?
- What hinders spiritual friendship in our culture today? What hinders it in your life?
- What are some basic steps that you can take to start moving toward spiritual friendship?