

Real Friendship

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[0 : 0 0] But I want to start by asking you this morning, how many real friends do you have? I say real friends. I don't mean Facebook friends, right? I mean real friends. A person can have a thousand Facebook friends. A person can have a thousand acquaintances and still be very lonely.

You know what I'm talking about? Because they don't have any real deep relationships. That type of friendship where you are able to truly connect with someone, where you are able to talk freely about anything and where that person you know understands you and you understand them.

You know, those are the type of friendships that we yearn for, don't we? Those are the type of friendships that we find so deep and meaningful that are so important for our lives. How many of those types of friends do you have? How many friendships like that are you investing in?

And another question that I want to ask this morning is what is it that makes that kind of friendship? You know, they don't happen overnight, do they? They don't fall from the sky.

What is it that draws you closer to someone than just mere acquaintances? What are the ingredients of true friendship? Well, as I ask that question, I ask it because I want us to think about the basis of what true friendship is.

[1 : 1 8] And I want to suggest this morning that the real foundation on which a true friendship is formed is something that I call a common worship. Now, let me explain what I mean.

We all worship different things, let's be honest, to varying degrees. And not just in a religious sense. When I talk about worship, I mean whatever we attach worth to, whatever we value in life.

That's what the word worship means. It means worth-ship. It's what we attach worth to. And we attach worth to various things. You know, the things that we're passionate about. The things that you find yourself thinking about on a daily basis.

The things that you find yourself gravitating towards. Those are the things that you attach worth to. But it's when you find someone else who also worships the same things.

Who attaches worth and is passionate about the same things as you are. It's then that a real friendship can start forming. That's the real basis of a friendship.

[2 : 1 6] It's finding someone who we can share our worship of something with. Whether that be cycling or cake decorating or, I don't know, classic blues music.

Whatever it is. It's something that you value and that you share that worship of with someone else. And the more that we value or worship something, the closer we actually grow to others who share that worship.

And that's why when someone becomes a Christian, they suddenly find you. This may have been your experience. Suddenly find that there's a whole community of people that they can connect with in a way that they never thought possible.

Because it's a community of people who share a common worship. Common worship, of course, of our Lord Jesus Christ. For example, let me tell you a personal experience.

I had a friend who, when I became a Christian, I suddenly grew close to this friend more than I had grown close to people before because of our common worship of Jesus.

[3 : 20] Even though we didn't share any other common interests, we shared the most important one. And we were close friends for many years because of it. But then, sadly, he walked away from the faith.

And suddenly, when he did that, our friendship, I suddenly found that our friendship was broken. There was this sort of insurmountable barrier between us because we had lost our common worship.

And that really is the same as what's happening here in Joshua chapter 22. But it wasn't just between two people with a broken relationship.

It was between two groups of tribes in the nation of Israel. Now, if you haven't been with us for our series in Joshua so far, let me give you some context. Israel had just finished a hard-fought seven-year-long war against some very ferocious enemies in the promised land of Canaan.

Only to now, at this point in the story, Joshua 22, be on the verge of civil war with one another. That's how serious it is. It's a shocking development as we come to this chapter.

[4 : 29] It's quite unexpected. But the reason, we must understand, the basis of the reason for this breakdown between these tribes and Israel is that their common worship of God was suddenly under threat.

And so the basis for their relationship, the thing that glued them together up until now, was being eroded away. And this is how the story goes. I'll summarize it for you. Everything was pretty good by the beginning of the chapter.

It was all hunky-dory. The war was over. The tribes of Israel were dividing the spoils and departing for their newly won lands to establish their farms and their homesteads. Homesteads. Everyone was happy.

But two and a half of those tribes had a longer journey than the rest because their land was on the far side of the Jordan River, away from everyone else. A long journey eastwards. And it was now time for them to say goodbye to their brothers in arms who they had fought beside in the trenches for years.

You can imagine the scene, can't you? It's quite an emotional scene. The embraces, the tears, the farewells, not knowing when they'll see each other again.

[5 : 34] And off they go to cross the river to their lands. But then comes the shock. Not four verses later, the western tribes who stayed behind are taking up arms and preparing to attack their brothers who had just left.

And we get to this point in the story and we wonder what could possibly have caused such a turnaround. They were allies the one minute and now they're enemies the next. And we find out, as we read on, in verse 11.

You see, it had been discovered that the eastern tribes on their way over the river had built an altar. And we go, okay, so what? What's the big deal?

So they built an altar. Well, you see, the big deal is that if we understand further back in Deuteronomy and God's law, God had commanded that Israel, his people, were only ever to have one altar at which to approach God and make their sacrifices for sin.

And Israel already had one of those. And the reason, actually, for that, one of the reasons, is that God was foreshadowing Jesus. In that he was saying, listen, there is only one way to approach me.

[6 : 40] You can't make your own way to approach me, which the world so often does. There is only one way that I have established to approach me, to come to me, to have your sins forgiven. In the Israelite days, it was through the sacrificial system at the one altar.

And in our day, of course, it's through the Lord Jesus Christ and his substitutionary death on the cross for our sins. But do you understand how serious this was then?

And the tribes going and building another altar basically was seen as a declaration that they're departing from the faith of Israel, from the one way to God, and they're setting up their own separate form of worship, which was no longer worship of the true God.

And, of course, the penalty for such apostasy, for an Israelite turning away from the God who had saved them and given them everything, the penalty for that was death, harsh as that is.

It was true. When you turn away from the God who gives you life, you forego your right to life. And so sad as it was, the rest of the nation, who were called to uphold God's laws, had no choice but to make war against those who had once been their brothers.

[7 : 48] But just as well, before they did that, we read in verse 13 to 15, if you're following along in your Bible, they send a delegation in a last-ditch attempt to reach out to the eastern tribes.

They're all ready to attack them. They're lining up in the river. They've got all their swords and their shields and armor ready. But they think, okay, let's just have one last effort.

Let's just reach out to them and send a delegation, Phineas and a bunch of others, try to get them to change their ways. And it turns out just as well they did because it ended up saving the whole nation from civil war, which would have completely changed the history of the Bible.

And we see how it saved them a little bit later. But what's important as we read this story, and now I want to kind of bring it to apply to us today as Christians, is the lessons that it holds for how God's people are meant to deal with one another, especially when it comes to the case of someone departing from the faith, like my friend that I mentioned earlier.

And there's two major lessons that I want to draw out this morning for us to consider from this passage. And the first is just the importance of actually holding each other to account. The importance of holding each other to account.

[9 : 02] Because this story, if you stand back and look at it, it's really a story about the tribes of Israel holding each other to account for their actions, isn't it? Now, firstly, we need to actually appreciate how difficult that was for them to do.

I mean, think of it. Think of how difficult it must have been for you to have just hugged someone goodbye who was your comrade in arms, and then, you know, a few hours later, you're ordered to take up your sword and go get ready to kill them.

That must have been tough. I'm sure more than once the Western Israelites thought, let's just, you know, let's just ignore this one time. Let's just let bygones be bygones.

You know, I mean, they want to worship in their own way. Who are we to tell them otherwise? I'm sure as they were marching eastwards, they were thinking, come on, is there any other way? I mean, that's probably what would happen today, isn't it?

Everybody's free to do their own thing. We can't tell people how to go about their lives. Who are we to, you know, enforce standards on others? Except the Israelites didn't say that.

[10 : 06] They took this seriously. They realized they needed to call their brothers out and hold them to account. They couldn't just do what they wanted. They were created by God.

God had given them a law. His will for how he wants them to live. They can't just do their own thing and make their own laws. They were God's people and they needed to live like God's people.

And if they didn't, this is important, if they didn't live like God's people, those Eastern tribes, it didn't only affect them, it affected the Western tribes as well. And that's really the basis for the argument that the delegation takes over the river.

Look at what they said, verse 17. This is quite important to understand. Now they've come across the river. They're confronting the leaders of the Eastern tribes. And they say, Was not the sin of Peor enough for us?

Up to this very day we have not cleansed ourselves from that sin, even though a plague fell on the community of the Lord. And are you now turning away from the Lord? If you rebel against the Lord today, tomorrow he will be angry with the whole community of Israel.

[11 : 08] And then verse 20. When Achan, son of Zerah, was unfaithful in regard to the devoted things, did not wrath come on the whole community of Israel? He was not the only one who died for us.

And you see their point? You see what they're trying to do here? They're citing examples in Israel's history so far, the Peor and Achan. And you can look those up in your own time.

We'll do that in our Bible studies during our growth groups this coming week. But he's citing examples of when the turning away of the few affected the many.

And he feared that the same thing was about to happen in the nation of Israel, that a few people going astray would have dire consequences for the entire community of Israel. Because that's a dynamic of a community, in any community, isn't it?

The actions of a few or even one person can affect negatively the whole community. So, I mean, think, for example, of the fires that we had on our mountains at the beginning of this year.

[12 : 13] Remember that? I mean, even yesterday you may have woken up and seen smoke in the sky because there was a huge fire in Howt Bay. It's a big problem in Cape Town that we're so susceptible to these runaway fires.

And we've had it for years and years. But in each of those cases, the whole community suffered because of the actions of a few, didn't they? Millions of rands in property damage.

Our taxes paying for the fuel of those helicopters who put the fires out. And yet how did those fires start? While hundreds of thousands of people were affected, the fires normally started by one or two people just throwing a cigarette butt out the window or deliberately setting off a fire.

The action of one or two individuals affecting the whole city. But you see, it doesn't only work with fire. It also works with sin in the same way.

That's how sin works in the community of God's people. The Bible warns us over and over again. When your brother or sister is going astray from God and allowing sin to come in and have a place and take control in their lives, it doesn't just affect them.

[13 : 23] It affects you as well. It affects the whole community. It opens up the relationships they have to that sin and tempts others to do the same and tempts others to think, well, it's not too bad.

They do it so I can as well. And it spreads like a virus or like a fire. And soon that one insignificant little fire has sent a blaze through the whole community.

It happens in churches. I've seen it before. And so just as the Israelites knew that they couldn't ignore the waywardness of their brothers, so Christians today are called to be on the lookout for sin in the lives of each other.

We've got to take this seriously. We can't have the... If we're a community of Christians and we're called to follow Jesus and to do that together and to help each other follow Jesus, to spur each other on to follow Jesus, we can't just play with sin.

We can't not take it seriously. We can't just say, oh, well, you know, let them live the way they want to. I mean, it's not our job to force people to do this or that. But if we're a community, we've got to look out for each other.

[14 : 24] We've got to be ready to call each other out on sin and on bad habits and on drifting away from the Lord and on rebellion against what He calls us to be.

And we've got to be able to ask the hard questions, the uncomfortable questions, before it starts damaging us all. Are you ready to do that as a Christian? If you're a Christian here this morning, are you ready to ask the hard questions of your brothers and sisters?

Are you ready to take responsibility for their lives and come alongside them and help them just as much as they help you to keep following the Lord? Because it will damage us all if we leave it unchecked.

And that's why Paul says in 1 Corinthians, very harsh words, he says, purge the wicked person from among you. Purge. Now, don't misunderstand me, especially if you're new to church and, you know, you maybe still don't get how this whole Christian thing works.

We're not pretending to be a bunch of holier-than-thou perfect people, not by a long shot. We're not. We're sinners, each of us here at this church. We admit that we are sinners and we're saved by grace alone.

[15 : 36] If it was possible for us to be perfect, Jesus would not have had to come and die in place of our sins. We believe that we're saved and have the hope of eternal life through no work of our own, but by trusting in Jesus alone.

But what that also means, what trusting in Jesus means, is that we're a community of people who follow him and seek to obey him. Not to get saved, but because that's what we've been saved for.

Let me say that again. It's so important. We don't come and seek to obey God to get saved. We do it because we believe in Jesus who saved us, but that's the reason he saved us, to do the good works that God prepared us in advance to do.

He saved us for the new creation, where we will be perfect. And right now, we've got to start preparing for the lives that God has in store for us.

We've got to start living as the people he's called us to be. We can't just believe in Jesus and carry on living our own way. We've got to realize he saved us to be different people. And if someone isn't willing to do that and to change in response to the gospel, then they shouldn't be part of the church.

[16 : 50] They're imposters, and they have to be put out and shown for who they really are. That's what the Bible says. And not just, I'll say it again, not just for the sake of the community, but also as a warning to that person to change their ways.

And that is why this very uncomfortable thing called church discipline exists. And it's very uncomfortable and it's very un-PC. It's not something that our culture and our world likes the idea of.

But it's the process that Jesus taught us by which people who are harboring unrepentant sin are put out of church membership. Uncomfortable as it is, it's necessary and we need to uphold church discipline in our own communities.

I've had to ask people, myself, in this church, recently, to leave for that very reason. To withdraw their church membership. And it wasn't comfortable.

It's not nice, but I tell you that because in a world where anything goes, we as a church need to take sin seriously. Not just in our own lives, but in the lives of the people next to us, in the lives of our Christian brothers and sisters.

[17 : 58] But now that doesn't mean that we excommunicate someone the moment they show any signs of sin. Okay, we've got to act graciously. We've got to realize we're all in the same boat. We're all sinners.

Excommunication, if I can use that word, which just means someone leaving membership of the church, isn't to be our first port of call. And we see that here as well in Joshua 22.

We've got to go to any lengths we can to persuade the person to change their ways before taking action. That's what Jesus taught about church discipline. It shouldn't be the first port of call. There's a process to follow.

Just like the Israelites sent that delegation to reach out to their brothers before they had to attack them. And notice, I wonder if you picked up, the length they went to in order to persuade the Eastern tribes to change their ways.

They even offered to share their own land. Did you notice that? To help the Eastern tribes to turn from their apparent sin. Verse 19, you see it. Look what they said. If the land you possess is defiled, come over to the Lord's land where the Lord's tabernacle stands and share the land with us.

[19 : 08] But do not rebel against the Lord. I mean, that was a big sacrifice. That was a big thing for them to do. They've just won this land. They've just allocated who has this land and they're willing to say, listen, you know what?

Your holiness, your walk with the Lord is more important than our possessions and our land. Why don't you come and we'll give our land to you. They were willing to give up something of their own to help their brothers turn from sin.

Are you willing to do that? For a brother or sister who's caught in sin and rebellion and waywardness against the Lord? Are you prepared to sacrifice time, effort, energy, money in order to come alongside someone and maybe set up a time every week that you can read the Bible and pray with them because you know that's what they need to hear even though that's going to inconvenience you?

Or whatever sacrifice the situation calls for to help them overcome their sin. Is the holiness of your brother or sister more important than your time and your possessions?

Well, I hope it is. I mean, that's what the Israelites give us an example of here. We've got to take sin seriously. We've got to not let it linger in the lives of people who are meant to be God's people and who it's our responsibility to look out for.

[20 : 29] We're in a war, people. Let me just remind you of that. The Bible stresses over and over again we are in a spiritual war in this life.

And just like any war, soldiers look out for each other. They watch each other's backs. Are we doing that as soldiers of Jesus Christ? Are we calling each other out?

Are we holding each other to account? But now here's an interesting scenario. What if we get it wrong? You know, what if we suspect I've seen this happen.

I've been involved in it myself. What if we suspect a certain sin is occurring when it's not? And we kind of phone them up and say, I've really got to talk to you about this. We take them out for coffee. We say, listen, I know that you're battling with this.

And you give them a whole lecture and then they go, you've got the wrong end of the stick. That's not happening at all. And you feel rather embarrassed. You've been in that situation? I have.

[21 : 25] Well, you know what I say? I say it's better to call them out and make a mistake than not call them out at all. Because that turns out that's exactly what happened here in Joshua 22 with the Israelites.

The top guys came and confronted the Eastern tribes. They cited examples. They had this huge lecture telling the Eastern tribes to change their ways. But then when the Eastern tribes finally get a word in, it turns out that it was a whole big misunderstanding.

All right. They explained, listen, we never intended to build another altar, a new altar. The one we built was only ever meant to be a copy of the real altar, but never to be used for sacrifices.

That's what they explained. And it's quite touching when we find out why they built this copy altar. Have a look from verse 24. No, we did it for fear that someday your descendants might say to ours, what do you have to do with the Lord, the God of Israel?

The Lord has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you, you Reubenites and Gadites. You have no share in the Lord. So your descendants might cause ours to stop fearing the Lord. So that's why they made this altar.

[22 : 36] It turns out that rather than building this altar to depart from the faith of Israel, they did it for the very opposite reason. They did it to prevent their children from departing from the true faith because they lived so far away.

And they feared that their children would depart and that the Western tribes would cut them off because they lived so far away. They built it to remind future generations that there is only one place to approach God and that is at the altar in Israel.

And they feared that their children would forget this. They feared for the faith of their children. Isn't that touching? And that's our second lesson for this morning, briefly.

Fearing for the faith of our children. See, as God's people, not only are we to keep an eye on each other's faith, we are to keep watch over the faith of our children.

And I'm not just talking to parents here. If we are a community of God's people, all of the adults are called to parent the children, to keep watch over the faith of the children in our church.

[23 : 43] Think about it. In 50 years' time, most of the people sitting here will be gone. Will St. Marks still exist? Will St. Marks community still exist? Who will be sitting in these pews?

What are we doing to ensure that the faith in Christ that we have is carried onwards in the next generation? Do we fear for the faith of our children?

Genuinely. And as I say, not just in your immediate family, but do you fear for the faith of the children in our community? Not just the church community, but the community we live in.

They're growing up in a world that is full of lies and misinformation and false gods. At every turn, are we making sure they never forget that there is only one true God and that there is only one way to approach Him?

And that is not through an altar in Israel, it's through Jesus Christ. Are we making sure they grow up knowing that full well? Or is that going to be forgotten in a few generations' time?

[24 : 47] You know, don't think that the church of the future is going to help our children keep the faith. Newsflash, they are the church of the future. No one else is going to be.

And if we're not, you know, forming foundations in their lives telling them the truth, nobody else is going to do that. And so are we investing as a church in our children and in our children's ministry?

We have a professional children's worker sitting in Belfast right now waiting to come here to help us to do just that, but she doesn't have enough financial support yet. Do we fear enough for the faith of our children?

Do we take children's ministry seriously enough to pray for her, to commit her in prayer, that God would provide the funds she needs, to pray for our children, to dig deep in our own pockets, to invest the gospel into the lives of our children?

And if not with money, have you considered giving up your time for the faith of our children to help in Sunday school? We could always use new Sunday school teachers and assistants.

[25 : 51] If you're not sure that you can do it, just give it a try. Sit in on a lesson. So important. Do we fear for the faith of our children? Notice as well that this altar that the eastern tribes built for the sake of their children, we're told in verse 10, it's an interesting little detail, have a look.

We're told in verse 10 that it was of imposing size. That's interesting. But it's important. They wanted this to be huge. They wanted people as their children were traveling to look on the horizon and see this thing.

And it leads us to ask ourselves the question, are we making the truth of Christ imposing in the lives of the next generation? Something that they can't ignore.

Parents, are you teaching your children the truth of Scripture daily, even when it's inconvenient and you just want to get them ready for school, or you just want to go to bed, or you just want to make supper?

Are you stopping to make the truth of Christ imposing in their daily lives? Are you showing your children who you worship in the routine of life so that they'll share your worship, that you'll have a common worship with your children?

[27 : 08] Well, if you're not, then maybe you've got to examine what you truly worship. If it's not obvious to your children that you love God, maybe it's because you don't.

and maybe you need to do some soul-searching and examine your own life for unrepentant sin so that you can be part of a community of believers who share a truly common worship.

Can we be that at St. Mark's? Can we be a community of believers who don't just come to church on a Sunday, but we share a common passion for Jesus?

That is what a church is all about. A church is not a people who happen to gather at the same place at the same time. Church is a group of people who share a common worship, a passion, a value for Jesus Christ, and a group of people who look out for each other, who are involved in each other's lives, and who make the truth prominent in our relationships with each other and who spur each other on to be the people that God calls us to be.

Are you going to be one of those people? What an exciting, task we have as God's people on earth. Get involved in it if you're not, and live the life that God calls us to live.

[28 : 28] Let's pray and ask for his help to do that. Yes, Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you that even in a story that was written thousands of years ago in a culture that is totally alien from our own, you have something to say to us.

Lord, thank you for reminding us of the importance of holding each other to account, the importance of fighting the battle against sin that you've called us to fight, the importance of watching each other's back.

Help us to do that as soldiers of Christ, Lord. And Lord, help us to truly fear for the faith of our children so much so that we will establish the routines that need to be established in our homes.

And Lord, I pray for anybody who's sitting here today who maybe this morning has come to the realization that they are not in right relationship with you, that they have not come to trust and follow Christ.

Lord, I pray that you would draw close to them. I pray that you would help them to see and realize and understand what Jesus came to earth to do for them so that they could have their sins forgiven and that they could have the hope, the sure hope of eternal life and right relationship with you.

[29 : 42] Lord, would you cause them to come to Jesus? Would you cause them to repent and put their faith in him? Lord, we pray that you'd be with us for the rest of this day.

Draw close to us, help us to enjoy this day of rest that you've given us but help us to rest in you and in your love for us and in the assurance of your salvation through Christ.

We pray this all in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Very cool. Go ahead. Women. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.