

A Believing Friend Is a Treasure

Friends are important. Both the Bible and *Songs and Hymns of Zion* speak of friends. We all have positive experiences that we can associate with friends. But, what is the purpose of a friend? Probably most people find that sharing an experience with someone enriches it. Whether it be a vacation, an exciting moment, or simple pleasures of the day, we may want to tell someone about it. The same is true with difficult moments and sorrow. It is easier to work through difficulties if we can share them with someone, just as Job experienced when his friends came to comfort him and mourn with him. An old saying reminds us, “When you share your joys they multiply; when you share your sorrows they are divided.”

Healthy friendships take effort to develop, but are a great blessing. Some people have many close friends and others only a few. Regardless of the number, it feels good to share the thoughts of our heart with someone else. Mutual sharing of inner thoughts helps us feel connected. Sometimes, we might find that we can talk about some matter easier with one friend and another matter easier with a different friend. Age is not a barrier to friendship. When we have friendships with elders, we can be encouraged as we learn about God’s protection and blessing in their lives. Elders find that friendships with younger people provide energy and a sense of optimism for the future.

It is natural to become especially close to people who share common experiences, whether the experiences are school-related, work projects, volunteer experiences, or mutual events. Often these experiences are shared between believers and unbelievers. We can support each other in life’s tasks. It is good to get to know our neighbors and reach out to them, supporting them and receiving support in daily life. Mutual love and respect drive friends to help each other. Yet, there is reason to be watchful in our relationships.

The Bible contains instruction about the types of friendships to develop. We are instructed to love one another, but God’s Word also instructs us to not be “unequally yoked” with those on the outside of His kingdom. At the 2015 Summer Services in Outlook, Randy Haapala shared two pictures during the youth presentation. The first picture was of two oxen joined by a yoke, ready to work side by side. Each ox would pull the same direction and as a team they would walk straight. The other picture was of a donkey yoked to an ox. It was clear that when the two animals move together, it would be impossible to go in a straight line. The pictures illustrate the instruction in Scripture.

Why might Scriptures warn of being unequally yoked? It is because we want to be “yoked with” (or closest to) those friends that will help us get to heaven. To achieve a goal, it is important to keep focused on the goal and to be surrounded by those who support the goal. This is especially true of the goal of heaven. Only believing friends can preach the gospel. They warn us when we start to go astray. They are “yoked” together with a goal of heaven. If our unbelieving friends become too important, the activities we do with them can begin to take the place of activities with believers and can pull us off course. It pays to develop and foster friendships with people that help us think and behave in positive ways and that help keep us focused on heaven.

Participation in intramural sports is an example of a fun, physical activity that can draw us too close to unbelievers. Through the games, friendships grow, and the connection to the group tightens. It can be difficult to step away from the group even if the game schedule shifts to a time that would otherwise include activity with believing friends. We are then in danger of the world being too important. “Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God (James 4:4).” We want to be watchful in these areas, remembering

that our goal is heaven, and it is our believing friends that can help us get there.

Our unbelieving friends can be very dear to us. It could even be that we start to see the flaws of our believing friends while focusing on the good in our unbelieving friends. Certainly believers are sinful people. But may we remember to pray that God would keep the beauty of God's kingdom clear for us and that we could love our believing escorts as pardoned sinners.

The true joy of believing is felt when we can hear the gospel of the forgiveness of sins from a fellow traveler. When we can visit together with our friends about both the joys and sorrows of life, we fulfill what is written in Galatians 6:2: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."

Becky Randall

Discussion Questions:

1. Sing song of Zion #350. Consider how "the friends we cherish...stay our feeble knees."
2. What has Christian fellowship with believers meant to you in your life?
3. What are some dangers of getting too close to unbelieving friends?
4. Sometimes our relationships, even with friends, can have difficulties. See the March 2014 *Voice of Zion* article to read more about *Difficulties in Human Relationships*.