

What Does
the Bible
Say About... ?

Friendship

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Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter:
whoever finds one has found a treasure (Sirach 6:14).

To Betsy Pawlicki, O.P.,
Marge and Dennis Colgan,
and Cathy Howard, O.P. (R.I.P.)

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Series Preface

The Bible remains the world's number one best-seller of all time. Millions of copies in more than two thousand languages and dialects are sold every year, yet how many are opened and read on a regular basis? Despite the impression the Bible's popularity might give, its riches are not easy to mine. Its message is not self-evident and is sometimes hard to relate to our daily lives.

This series addresses the need for a reliable guide to reading the Bible profitably. Each volume is designed to unlock the Bible's mysteries for the interested reader who asks, "What does the Bible say about...?" Each book addresses a timely theme in contemporary culture, based upon questions people are asking today, and explaining how the Bible can speak to these questions as reflected in both Old and New Testaments.

Ideal for individual or group study, each volume consists of short, concise chapters on a biblical theme in non-technical language, and in a style accessible to all. The expert authors have been chosen for their knowledge of the Bible. While taking into account current scholarship, they know how to explain the Bible's teaching in simple language. They are also able to relate the biblical message to the challenges of today's Church and society while avoiding a simplistic use of the biblical text for trying to "prove" a point or defend a position, which is called

“prooftexting”—an improper use of the Bible. The focus in these books is on a religious perspective, explaining what the Bible says, or does not say, about each theme. Short discussion questions invite sharing and reflection.

So, take up your Bible with confidence, and with your guide explore “what the Bible says about friendship.”

Chapter One

Friends with Benefits: Redefining Friendship

Introduction

A young woman compares her parents' Facebook page with her own, laughing that they only have a handful of "friends," while she has thousands. The commercial then cuts to her parents and their friends enjoying a beautiful drive on the open road. Back to the young woman who sits alone before her computer screen and laughs at a video, "That can't be a puppy!" The commercial played off the developing redefinition of the term "friend." In the digital age, "friends" are those whom you grant access to your page, so that they can "like" or occasionally comment on something you have posted. To help you build your "friends," Facebook will even suggest the names of other users who may share a marginal connection with you or your other "friends." Or you can purchase "friends" to boost the numbers on your social media account.

The cheapening of the quality of friendship reached an all-time low for me when my niece explained a practice popular among some young adults. "Friends with benefits" means you may occasionally use your friends to satisfy

your sexual desires with no strings attached. It would seem that the use and misuse of friendship language is endemic in our social-media-driven society. To allow the continued dilution of the term, and I'd say, downright corruption of it, is to lose sight of one of humanity's greatest gifts, that of friendship. When we call someone our friend, what do we mean? That answer used to be less complicated before the advent of social media. Now we measure our friends in the number of "likes" we get, and we "unfriend" someone virtually if we no longer want to see a posting of yet another cute cat video. *The Oxford English Dictionary* has even included this virtual friendship among its definitions of "friend."¹¹ Throughout this book, we will mostly be focusing on the more traditional definition of friend as persons with whom one has developed close and informal relationships of mutual trust and intimacy.

Will You Be My Friend?

How we define friendship and how we behave with others have significant implications for our larger society. In fact, ancient philosophers like Aristotle believed that democracy itself was built upon the maintenance of friendship. And since his understanding of friendship forms the foundation of today's definition, we will summarize the ideas of Aristotle on the topic and introduce how Thomas Aquinas reinterpreted those ideas for a Christian context.

Aristotle held that friendship is essential to living a good and useful life, and he recognized three different

types of friendship. The first is utilitarian. We become friends with others because the relationship is mutually beneficial. The second type of friendship is centered on pleasure and enjoyment. The third type of friendship is the truest kind since it is predicated on virtue and love. Of the three types of friendships, the utilitarian and the pleasurable are fleeting since they are based on transitory things. Once the need is met and the pleasure fades, the reason for the friendship evaporates. When we ponder past friendships that have faded, we may discern that they were based on either usefulness or pleasure. Aristotle describes the fleeting friendships of youth as examples. But while the friendship may be transitory it is no less a friendship, offering to the friends a mutual benefit and opportunity for personal growth. We may no longer stay up all night chatting with our girlfriends about the trials and tribulations of our teen lives, but those nocturnal conversations were formative to our growth as social beings. The locker room antics showed us how to interact with others, value team effort, and suffer through loss and celebrate victory.

The third category, virtuous friendship, is highly prized. Aristotle saw such a friend as another self, so that what people would desire for themselves, they also desired for their friends. Ancient historian Diogenes of Laertius reported that to the query, “What is a friend?” Aristotle replied, “A single soul dwelling in two bodies.”¹² To the Roman orator Cicero (106–43 BC), this friend was also a second self.

What is sweeter than to have someone with whom you may dare discuss anything as if you were communing with yourself? How could your enjoyment in times of prosperity be so great if you did not have someone whose joy in them would be equal to your own?¹³

This last sentiment is echoed in the Book of Ecclesiastes (also called Qoheleth, “the Preacher”):

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)

These are the friends who have become such a part of the fabric of our life that when they come to Thanksgiving, our children call them “aunt” or “uncle,” though there is no blood tie.

Aristotle recognizes virtue or character friendship as the highest form of friendship, since it leads to the human being’s highest potential, what we would call happiness. St. Thomas Aquinas reinterprets this through the lens of love, so that charity friendship is the activity that culminates in happiness, and “describes a person who has reached the highest possible development proper to a human being.”¹⁴ According to Aristotle, such a friendship demonstrates beneficence, mutuality, and betterment. Building on Aristotle’s definition, Aquinas explained these aspects in light of our desire to be friends with God and of the impor-

tance of charity. But beneficence or doing good for another does not alone mark one as a friend. In fact, we need only remember Jesus' charge to do good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27) to realize that good works do not establish a friendship. For a relationship to develop, there must be reciprocity. We have all experienced relationships that we thought were friendships but discovered that mutuality was missing. Our loving actions were not reciprocated or even well-received. Reciprocity is not simply a measurement of "this for that." It includes a mutual care and sympathy with the friend. We may be able to do nothing to mitigate our friend's suffering, but we can be present to them in their pain. The Jewish mourning ritual of sitting *shiva* is a prime example of "being with." During the first seven days after a death, friends visit the family of the deceased and offer their presence as consolation for their loss. The good of the other who is mutually concerned about your own good leads to the third characteristic that marks a true friendship: we are better people because of our friends.

Our true friendships evidence beneficence, mutuality/reciprocity, and betterment. Not every aspect will be equally in play at every moment of a relationship. Even friendships that originate in advantage or pleasure demonstrate these qualities to various degrees. The foundation of friendship relationships is a certain level playing field. But if Aquinas is right, and our goal in life is to become friends of God, how do we do that when we are most certainly not on a level playing field? A second question is, "why would God want to be our friend in the first place?"

The answer to both is actually quite simple, according to Aquinas. God desires our happiness, and the fullness of that happiness is expressed in friendship with God. It is initiated by grace, and witnesses to the divine friendship between Father and Son which is expressed in the Spirit of love. And it is a life activity to which God invites us. But as Aquinas recognized, we are at a bit of a disadvantage given our limited human nature. “Charity, as we have said, is our friendship for God arising from our sharing in eternal happiness, which is not a matter of natural goods but of gifts of grace.”¹⁵ The gift of grace transcends the gulf between the limitation of human beings and the incomprehensibility of the Divine. Grace helps to level the playing field.

Just so, as Aristotle noted, friendship requires a certain equality, and such is not possible with God. Aquinas answered this by explaining that our friendship with God is in part an analogy, a friendship *of a sort*. The fullness of our friendship with God is made complete by our union with God. Until then, our friendship is just at the beginning stages. As ethicist Paul Wadell notes, “What grace intends, charity achieves, this union of ourselves with God that is the harvest of a lifetime of friendship, of passionate seeking for God.”¹⁶

This friendship love initiated by God, sustained by grace, and witnessed to by the Trinity, is the ultimate spiritual pursuit. The Scriptures are the Word of God, God’s revelation to us about God’s activities, desires, and hopes for God’s people. As such, we should be able to search the Bible for examples of friendships that illuminate our path toward friendship with God.

The Bible as a Narrative of God's Friendship

Numerous examples of friendships are threaded throughout the Scriptures. For example, in the books of Exodus and Numbers, we meet Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, three siblings who remind us of our own family's blessings and squabbles. When the baby Moses is placed in a basket in the Nile River, his sister carefully keeps watch, and then offers to get a wet nurse for the baby when he is "found" by Pharaoh's daughter (Exodus 2:4). As an adult, Moses encounters God in a burning bush. God directs him to lead God's people out of slavery (chapters 3–4). But Moses admits he isn't a good speaker, so God sends Moses' brother Aaron to serve as the spokesperson. Together the brothers go to Pharaoh and eventually secure the release of the Hebrew slaves (chapters 5–13). And then after the miraculous crossing through the Red Sea, Miriam leads the women in song and dance: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; / horse and rider he has thrown into the sea!" (15:21).

Moses is the leader, Aaron a priest, and Miriam a prophet—three siblings who work together to realize God's plan for Israel. But forty years on the road is an exceedingly long journey. Along the way, Aaron bends to the will of the people and builds a golden calf which the people worship (Exodus chapter 32). Later both Miriam and Aaron grow jealous of Moses' relationship with God, so they complain that he had married a foreigner. In no uncertain terms, God sets them straight:

Hear my words: / When there are prophets among you, / I the LORD make myself known to them in visions; / I speak to them in dreams. / Not so with my servant Moses; / he is entrusted with all my house. / With him I speak face to face—clearly, not in riddles; / and he beholds the form of the LORD. / Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? (Numbers 12:6-8)

God punishes Miriam, to the horror of Aaron, who begs Moses to intercede. “And Moses cried to the LORD, ‘O God, please heal her’” (Numbers 12:13). These three may have had their disagreements along the way, but when put to the test, friendship and family win out.

The Book of Ruth is the story of a steadfast friendship born out of adversity. A novella sandwiched in our canon between Judges and First Samuel, Ruth is a tragedy turned to triumph because of the female characters who rely on their own ingenuity and love. When the story opens, Naomi has lost her husband and two grown sons. She dismisses her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, so that they may return to their own people. But Ruth recommits to her mother-in-law, even though she is legally freed from caring for her. She chooses to be an alien in a foreign land in order to accompany Naomi into a new life.

Do not press me to leave you / or to turn back from following you! / Where you go, I will go; / where you lodge, I will lodge; / your people shall be my people, / and your God my God. / Where

you die, I will die— / there will I be buried. /
May the LORD do thus and so to me, / and more
as well, / if even death parts me from you! (Ruth
1:16-17)

After they arrive in Bethlehem, the two set about finding a spouse for Ruth so as to bring up children in the name of Ruth's deceased husband. Their faithfulness in adversity is well-rewarded. Ruth marries Boaz, and their son "Obed [became the father] of Jesse, and Jesse [became the father] of David" (Ruth 4:22).

The Bible also depicts friendships among comrades-in-arms, bosses and workers, and companions on the journey. The friendship of fellow soldiers David and Jonathan is forged under the weight of war and Saul's evil machinations. In First Samuel, Saul is anointed king over the people, but his kingship is wrought with personal demons and professional difficulties. David, a shepherd's son from the tiny village of Bethlehem, will rise from Saul's ranks and after Saul's death become the king of Israel. But before all that, we meet David and his friend Jonathan, the son of Saul (1 Samuel chapters 18–20).

The soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. . . . Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. (18:1,3-4)

Paul “transforms the meaning and experience of friendship by redefining each of the essential ideas of friendship given by Hellenistic essays on friendship in terms of communion with Christ and empowerment by Christ.”²⁰ Likely, Paul’s own experience led to his deep appreciation of the gift and value of friendship, for the Philippians held a special place in his heart for the help they offered him during his sojourn among them and when he needed assistance (1:19, 4:14).

Conclusion

Though written nearly 2,500 years ago, Aristotle’s definition of a friend still holds true. We know we have a true friend, one whom Aristotle calls “virtuous,” because he or she demonstrates beneficence by doing good for us and with us. A friend is also one with whom we are mutual and reciprocal. It’s not all on me to uphold the friendship. And finally, a friend makes us better. He or she calls us to be our best selves, often seeing in us possibilities we cannot see in ourselves.

Thomas Aquinas ups the ante, so to speak, when he proposes that our goal in this Christian life is to become friends with God. Our ultimate happiness resides in our pursuit of this divine relationship. So we should not be surprised that our Scriptures have much to say about friendship. Whether personal, familial, political, or communal, the biblical portrayals of friendship mirror for us what friendship with God might be like.

Now let's go home. Let's turn to questions about the friends in our lives and how we might find Scriptural support as we, too, endeavor to become friends of God.

For Reflection:

- How do you define friendship? Of the Scripture passages cited in this chapter, which one most speaks to your experience of friendship?
- Have you experienced the three types of friendship that Aristotle describes: utilitarian, pleasure-seeking, and virtuous?