

Today, we're going to talk about something that can bring joy, hope, strength and encouragement to our lives. Or it can bring sorrow, despair, weakness and discouragement. Sometimes this thing brings both into our lives at the same time.

Some people have many of this thing. Some have few. Some have virtually none. Just mentioning it can bring us mental joy or mental pain. So I'm going to tell you what it is now. I want you to gauge your reaction to this word.

So here it is – Friendship. For some of us, this word brings to mind people who bring us joy, hope and strength. For others, it brings up sorrow, despair, discouragement or loneliness. Maybe we have lost a close friend. Maybe we used to have some good friends that moved away. Maybe we have recently experienced a fracture in a relationship with a friend. Maybe we hardly have any friends. When you think about your life, who are your friends?

What is a friend? One definition states “a friend is a person you like and enjoy being with.” A lot of people could fit that description in our lives. You might like and enjoy being with a classmate, someone on the bus, a neighbor or a barista in a coffee shop that you talk with regularly. But would you consider them friends?

Another definition goes a little deeper. It says “a friend is a person one knows and with whom one has a bond of mutual affection.” Not only do you enjoy being with someone. They enjoy being with you. And you know them and they know you to a certain degree.

If we think about our own circles of relationships, we have some people in the acquaintance circle. Other people are in our friends circle. We have this mutual knowledge and affection with them. Then there might a few whom we would say are in our inner circle. They would be close friends. These are people we could go to with a problem and know we would not be turned away. We feel safe with them.

Sadly, some of us only have acquaintances in our lives. Some of us may not have one person in our life to whom we can go with anything. But we are not the first ones to face such realities. We do have good news today as we consider another piece of Jesus' heart for us. We're going to discover about Jesus heart for friendship with us. From such a friendship we can offer friendship to others. Our text today is:

Matthew 11:16-19 (ESV)

¹⁶ “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates,

¹⁷ “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’

¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ ¹⁹ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

This passage follows a startling incident in Jesus' life. At least it startles me. John the Baptist languishes in a prison. This did not seem appropriate to John the forerunner of the Messiah. It seems he began to doubt Jesus. So he sends his disciples to ask Jesus a question. “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

Jesus responds by giving multiple proofs that show He is the promised one from God. Then he questions the crowd about their motives. He asks “What did you go out to see when you went to see John?” And is John? Jesus affirms John in his role as the promised forerunner of the Messiah. But he goes further and claims John actually fulfills an Old prophecy. In the last words of the Old Testament, Malachi 4:5-6, the Lord says, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” In Matthew 11:13-14, Jesus says, “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah, who is to come.” Therefore, Jesus affirms that John is a messenger from God.

But then Jesus asks the crowds another question in our passage – verse 16. “But to what shall I compare this generation.” He tells a parable of children in the marketplace. Apparently, while parents shopped in the market, children played. Sometimes they played wedding or funeral. So one group played an instrument or pretended to play an instrument, the others were supposed to dance like at a wedding. But if they played or sang a funeral song, the others were supposed to act like they were at a funeral. However, in this parable, the one set of children did not cooperate with the group playing or singing the song.

So the first set of children call out – “We played a flute for you but you did not dance; we sang a dirge (or funeral song) for you and you did not mourn.” Jesus says that this generation is like children in the marketplace. Then he explains the comparison. John and Jesus are one set of the children. The crowd is the other.

Now there are two possible interpretations to this. Number one is that the crowd are the children playing the flute and singing the song. But neither John nor Jesus fulfilled their expectations. Interpretation two is Jesus and John are the children singing the songs or playing the music. The crowd is the group of children that does not respond to the singing or the tunes. That lack of response symbolizes their refusal to believe John and Jesus’ message. They did not respond despite the fact that God spoke to them from these two different approaches. Either interpretation shows a disconnect between the message from John and Jesus and the crowd’s response. Notice though both John and Jesus were sent from God, their ministry took very different approaches.

John came neither eating nor drinking. He was the severe prophet in the wilderness. He pointed to the holiness of God and the coming judgment on corruption. Many were attracted by this approach. They were baptized by John in a baptism of repentance.

Unlike John, Jesus came eating and drinking. He participated in the culture. He attended the banquets. He pointed to the joy and hope of the kingdom of God.

One commentator notes the contrast between Jesus and John. Jesus accepted invitations to urban banquets (cf. 9:10–15; Rom 14:17), while John was a wilderness prophet whose diet was locusts

(3:4) and who never banqueted (cf. Jer 16:8). Jesus came partly as God's ambassador to initiate relations with sinners (9:10–13), whereas John primarily took the role of biblical prophets in times of persecution (3:7). Jesus was a missionary within the culture, John a critic from outside it.

But the crowd rejected both messengers. They concluded John was demon possessed. Jesus was a glutton and drunkard.

Jesus concludes with the statement, "Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds." So this is a rebuke of the crowd's conclusions about John and Himself. Wisdom likely refers to God's wisdom. It is shown (justified, vindicated, shown to be right), by its deeds. The fruit of John and Jesus ministry shows they were actually authentic messengers from God. *"Overall, the generation of Israelites in which Jesus finds himself, with a few pleasant exceptions rejects both John and him. The former (John), is too ascetic for them; Jesus too celebratory. Ironically, neither approach can please them, just like children suggesting games to recalcitrant playmates who turn down every proposal. But John and Jesus' actions represent God's wisdom. Jesus, embodied as Wisdom will demonstrate the heavenly origin of his ministry through his deeds.* Craig Blomberg – NT Theology, 386. The crowd rejected God's prophet and God's Son. So this is the overall point of this section.

Within it, there is a connection to Jesus' heart for us. It's found as Jesus' quotes the crowd in verse 19 "Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Note the phrase "a friend of tax collectors and sinners." That doesn't really affect us that much. We probably recognize that we're all sinners. We all think, say or do things that go against God's ways. Yet we don't single out people who work for the Canada Revenue Agency as particularly evil. I have yet to see a trend on twitter that says #eviltaxcollectors. So we don't get this phrase.

But to the Jewish crowd in the first century, these two groups, tax collectors and sinners were considered the "worst sinners" in the community. Tax collectors were usually Jewish and worked for the Romans or Herod. They enforced unfair and oppressive taxes on their fellow countrymen. Many got rich by taking a cut of the taxes for themselves. So they were traitors and greedy. Then there were the sinners who lived a lifestyle of public sin. So prostitutes, adulterers, public drunks, thieves all fit into this

category called sinners. The crowd accuses Jesus of being a friend of tax collectors and sinners. He was willing to meet with them, eat with them and even enjoy their presence. To a strict, God fearing, holiness pursuing Jew, this was horrible. You did not associate with such people lest it compromise your holiness in some way.

How ironic especially that label “sinners.” Did the crowd think that because they didn’t participate in any of these public sins, this removed them from the category of sinner? Before we’re too hard on the crowd, don’t we do the same thing in ways? We may look down on others entangled in more public sins. But we tolerate our own greed, bitterness, slander, lying, gossip and hateful thoughts because these sins are less obvious.

Yet this label (friend of tax collectors and sinners) turned into a statement of comfort and hope for many. **What is Jesus’ heart for us? Jesus has a heart of friendship towards the worst of sinners.** He was a friend to the most despicable kinds of sinners known in that culture. If someone is aware of their own sinfulness, this piece of Jesus’ heart is a great comfort. In 1st century Jewish culture, where would the worst kind of sinners go for hope or comfort? Where would they find reason and help to change? Certainly not among judgmental religious people. Yet Jesus offered a heart of friendship to them and to us.

What did Jesus do as a friend? He helped sinners feel welcome and comfortable around him. Not by joining in their sin. He just want to be with them. He ate with people; enjoyed them; made time for them; welcomed them. They felt comfortable around Him. Luke 15:1 – “Now the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to him.” They sought Him out because they would find a welcome with Him. The two groups of people whom Jesus is accused of befriending in Matthew 11 are those who can’t stay away from him in Luke 15. They are at ease around him. They sense something different. Others hold them at arm’s length, but Jesus offers the enticing intrigue of fresh hope. What he is really doing, at bottom is pulling them into his heart.

Dane Ortlund Gentle and Lowly, points to the reality that in Jesus we can have a friend unlike any other. He writes, “Won’t most of us admit that even with our best friends, we don’t feel fully comfortable

divulging everything about our lives? We like them, and even love them – but not really, at the deepest heart level, entrust ourselves to them. Even in many of our marriages, we are friends of a sort, but we haven't gotten naked in soul the way we have in body."

Then Ortlund describes the uniqueness of Jesus' friendship with us. "In Jesus Christ, we are given a friend who will always enjoy rather than refuse our presence. This is a companion whose embrace of us does not strengthen or weaken depending on how clean or unclean, how attractive or revolting, how faithful or fickle, we presently are."

Yet welcoming is not the only aspect of friendship Jesus offered. He also offered a deeper friendship to His disciples. One way he did this was **He Revealed to them the depths of His heart**. In **John 15:16** - *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*. Deep friendships involved revealing the depths of our hearts to another. Jesus revealed His heart to His disciples. He opened Himself up and made known the Father and His will.

Another way Jesus engaged in friendship with His disciples; **He asked for support and prayer**. When Jesus suffered the agonizing anticipation of the cross he calls on Peter, James and John. **Matthew 26:38** – Then he said them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." Jesus experienced the joy and sorrow of friendship in these moments. Instead of watching and praying with Jesus, they fell asleep. So when Jesus came back to them, he experienced disappointment. Yet even in this he showed mercy. He acknowledged that their spirits were willing but their bodies weak.

A third way Jesus showed the ultimate friendship; **He laid down His life for His friends**. **John 15:13** – Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. Jesus proved Himself to be the ultimate friend by laying down His life for us. Jesus has a heart of friendship that He offers to the "worst of sinners" and also to ordinary sinners. Jesus heart of friendship goes deep with those who follow Him as disciples.

But how do we tap into this? How do we go about engaging in friendship with Jesus? So how might we respond to this? **1 - Receive the Lord's friendship for you**. Sometimes we think we have to

be “good enough” before we came to Christ. Yet He was a friend to the worst of sinners. The ultimate example of this is the thief on the cross. There was nothing good enough about him. There was nothing attractive or beneficial to Jesus’ ministry about Him. Yet Jesus reached out in love just hours before his death to save and befriend this thief. Such mercy, love and friendship is available to anyone willing to come to Jesus humbly. So if you have never received Christ, He invites you come to Him today.

If we’re Christians, we need to consider our friendship with the Lord. How we kept Him at arm’s length? Then we need to continue going deeper in our friendship with the Lord. He revealed His heart to us all through the pages of the Gospels. He wants us to open our hearts up to Him. He wants us to respond to the fact that He lay down His life for us. So engage in that friendship with the Lord.

- Time
- Enjoy His presence
- Open up your heart
- Share your hardships

2 - Offer friendship to one another within our community and beyond. There are people who need friendship in our community. They appreciate friendliness but long for friendship. With gathering restrictions lifting, we need to step back into face to face relationships where we share life together. Part of the grace and strength of healthy Christian community is authentic human friendships. We can be that more to one another. One way to do that especially in the weeks to come is to stick around after the worship service and take time to talk with others. I know for you introverts that can be hard. But you need friendship also. Don’t let your introversion go so far that you have or no friendships at all. But most of all receive the friendship of the Lord. So the word friendship can bring mental joy or pain. But we do have the ultimate friend in Jesus Himself. He welcomes you now to His table.