

DISCERNING LEVELS OF FRIENDSHIPS

Are you a good friend to people? Are you a person that says, "I don't have a lot of friends, but the ones I have are really good." Are you a person that says, "I have to have a lot of friends. I need a lot of people in my life." Let me ask you something else. Are you friends with Jesus? Are you comfortable with Him?

Are you able to talk to Him like you would your very best friend? That is the kind of relationship He wants to have with you and you can have it. It is possible to have it. Isn't that amazing? The God of the universe, the person who created everything that has been made. It says that in Colossians. "By Him everything that is made was made by Him". It also says about Jesus, "Before the foundations of the earth, He was alive." He was with God. God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit were busy creating everything. Yet, Jesus says, "I want to be your friend." Amazing isn't it. You know He is alive. He is not dead. He rose from the dead and is alive. He cares about you. He knows you at your worst, He knows you at your best, and He loves you. He likes you just like you are. He does not want you to stay like you are in some of the things you are doing, but He likes you. Never think that Jesus bases His friendship with you on anything other than the fact that He loves you, loves to be around you, and thinks you are great and wonderful.

Let's talk about levels of friendship today. There is a lot of thought about what you have to have to be a friend, what you have to do to be a friend. I want to talk to you about the people in your life. Does God want you to have a lot of friends? Yes, He does. You do not have to have a lot of intimate friends. In fact, you do not really have time to have a lot of intimate friends. They are too time consuming and take a lot of work. You have to keep nurturing them. You cannot have very many of those, but you can have a lot of acquaintances. You can speak in the people's lives. Some of us are outgoing and some of us are quiet. Opposites attract. I am drawn to quiet people because I am so outgoing. My very best friend is very outgoing. I am also drawn to people like my husband who are quiet and reflective. They do not say much. There is something about them, especially my husband, that makes me feel stronger. My husband and I are very good friends. In fact, my husband and I were really good friends for about a year before we ever dated. I was dating someone else and he was dating other people. We were just buddies. I did not even think about being attracted to him in a boyfriend/girlfriend way. When we finally started dating, it was a little bit odd to start falling in love with him because I thought, "This is weird. This is my friend." We went together for 2-1/2 years before we got married. As we fell more and more in love, and eventually married, I realized as our marriage went on that it was great that we were attracted to each other as friends first. We have a lot in common. We like to do the same things. We have the same values and goals in life. Those were picked out, determined, and talked about when there was no pressure to be anything other than just a good friend. Maybe you are not married yet and you are saying, "Am I ever going to find someone I will be happy with." Find someone that you just enjoy being friends with. Find a person you would pick just to be with, not for any other reason.

In discussing friendships, today we are going to spend a lot of time in Proverbs 18. If you have your Bible, I want you to turn to Proverbs 18. A lot of people ask what version of the Bible they should read out of. At one time everyone read the King James because that was all we had. Now we have so many. We have the New International Version, the New Living Bible, the Message Bible, New American Standard, Revised Standard. There are so many. In my quiet time, I have a Bible that has four translations side by side. I really enjoy reading that because I will read a passage and then see what it says in other translations.

When I am talking to you, I am using the Living Bible and the New Living Bible, sometimes the King James. I am trying to bring the Word of God to you in a way that sounds like God is talking to you in normal language, because that is how it is really. In discussing levels of friendship, there four levels of friends that you need to have.

Level 1 is casual friendships. These can be people who are not even Christians. In fact, they should not be. You should be so out in the world with the Word of Jesus in your heart, looking for people to help, listening to God for what He wants to say to them, and exposing yourself to all walks of life and all kinds of people. You have something you are attracted to in them because you notice them or you have sporadic contact with them. You get into conversations with them. You have a freedom there to ask general questions like where do you work? Where did you go to school? Are you married? Do you have any children? What do you like to do for fun? If you are a person that feels a little bit awkward in these kind of situations, and you say, "I just get in these big groups and I can't think of anything to say to anyone and I just wish I weren't there, but I have to be there because of my job," let me give you a little guideline to use in those kinds of situations. I am going to give you two. The first one is remember the acronym F-O-R-M.

F – Family Are you married? Do you have kids? What do your kids do? O – Occupation One way to

Family? Are you married? Do you have kids? What do your kids do? Occupation. One way to get people talking is to ask them what they do and then say, "Is that what you started out doing?" They will talk to you for 30 minutes about that simple question because 80% of all people are doing something they did not start out to do. I am one. I started out with a degree as a teacher. I taught four years and I have never taught since. A lot of people are like that. They do not really know what they want to do.

They start out somewhere and then doors open and lead them somewhere else.

R – Recreation. What do you like to do for fun? What is fun to do around here? What is going on around here? M – Message. Do you have something you want to share with them? If it is Jesus, the Holy Spirit will say, "Talk about Me in this particular area." Maybe your message is, "This is what I am doing with my life outside my job." Mine is that I am doing Pennies from Heaven. I am getting people to help me feed starving people. I have discovered that is an attention getter. People are interested. Everyone cares about people who are hungry. Everyone cares and they want to talk about it. Maybe that will help you.

Another thing to say when you have to go into a casual group of acquaintances and maybe you are feeling a little bit scared. If you will say to yourself right before you walk in, "I am calm, confident, and smiling." You would be amazed at how you can walk into any group and be at ease. You are calm, confident, and smiling. People like smiles. In fact, I think a smile is the prettiest thing on earth. I do not put anything above it. If you can ever get even a very gripey person to smile, they just look different. In these groups, the wrong response for you is, "I wonder what he thinks of me?" I like clothes and I like to look as pretty as I can. I have learned before you go out in public do everything you can to make sure you look as good as you possibly can. Then when you go out, completely forget about yourself and only think about other people. If you are not careful, when you are talking to people in this casual group, you will be thinking, "Are they better than I am? Do I feel less than everyone here?" Or you might be thinking, "How can they help me? Who in here can help me?" Every bit of that is the wrong way to think. You are not being a friend to people; you are using people. You have to check your responses. The best response is "How can I help them?" Just listen. Sometimes people just need you to be a good listener. They do not need you to talk at all. My daughter called me once and she said, "Mom, I don't want you to tell me what you think. I just want you to listen." That is what I did. People just need someone to listen. If you think, "I don't have a gift in this world. I can't do anything," remember that you can be a good listener. How do you become a good listener in this casual relationship? By asking questions. Remember, I have given you a way to ask questions.

The second level of friendship is called a casual friendship. They are not just acquaintances. You have a casual relationship with them. What is your casual friendship based on? It is based on common interests.

It is based on common activities and things you are concerned about. In this level of friendship, you have a freedom to ask more specific questions. You may have been thinking "I think I offend people. Why do I offend people?" Maybe it is because you are asking questions that you do not have the right to ask yet.

You have not won their trust. They cannot tell if you are really interested in them. They cannot tell if you have an agenda. You are just there to see what you can do to help. You can ask them about their goals in life. Your questions cannot be too pointed because you will seem pushy and you do not want to seem pushy. It makes people back away from you.

Also, make sure you have good breathe and that you smell good. I remember a man that wanted so much to help people and he had the worst body odor. People could not be around him. Even something as small as that. Make sure it is in order. One thing you can do in a casual friendship is to listen attentively and see if you can pick up on what God has been doing in their life and what God is wanting to do in their life. You can think about it and come up with specific questions that will help people move along to the next level of where God wants them. At this time in casual friendships, you can begin to discern negative qualities in people. A study was done at Harvard where they had some students watch a video of a professor for just a few minutes. Then they gave them 15 questions to see if they could discern what was in this teacher. I think they did it for 10 minutes. Then they did it for 2 minutes. They compared those answers with answers of the same 15 questions of students that had actually taken the course. When they compared the different groups, the answers were the same. There is something inside of you that can pick up on people. You can discern things. You and I know that everyone of us have strengths and weakness, good points and bad points. There is no one on earth that does not have these. You are going to begin to see it the more you are around people. At the same time, you can begin to pray for people when you see these qualities. What would be an example of that? Say you begin to notice that people are a little bit critical. What is the good trait that has gone bad? Discernment. They are able to discern and identify. You can pray for them. "Lord, I see this criticalness in them but I know that your good trait of discernment has just gotten out of whack. Lord, work in their heart. Help them to discern between good and evil, between right and wrong. Help them to do it in the right way." Another example would be if you see someone that is really lazy. They are just not out there working. That is a bad trait, but the opposite that is a good trait could be that they are very creative and their mind is very active. You can pray for them, "Lord open doors for them that allow them to express their creativity. Remember you are listening again for their needs. We all have needs and want people to be doing this for us. That is when you start moving into a close friendship. Remember, acquaintances can be nonbelievers. Casual friendships can

still be nonbelievers and that is okay.

When you start moving into good, close friendships, you are going to have to start narrowing who they are, what they believe in and what kind of standards they live by. You spend a lot more time with these friends. You begin to feel comfortable with them, but for some reason you do not have that intimate feeling. I will explain why you do not in a minute. There is something that is lacking there but it is still okay to have a close friendship with them. You do not feel safe enough to bare your absolute soul with them. These have to be people that are Christians. You begin to put your confidence in them and you begin to realize "I can trust this person. But, I can only trust to a certain level." That is okay. I want to read Proverbs 22:24 to you. "Make no friendship with an angry man." Did you hear that? Why? Because you will pick up their anger. You have to be so careful. There are a lot of angry people in the world today. It seems like there are more everywhere. You go in a store and everyone is irritated and upset. They want everything done the way they want it done. They feel you did not do what you could have done. There are a lot of angry people. When you are forming your closest friendship, do not have a friendship with an angry person. You might say, "I am married to one. What do I do about that?" You pray a great deal and you make sure that you carefully protect yourself. Protect your heart and ears from all of that anger, because you will pick it up. Close friends have a mutual sense of goals with you. You will discuss things, "I believe in this. I want to do this." They will say, "I do, too." That is why you will enjoy being around them. What is a good thing you could do for these friends at this level? Listen for their potential and what they could achieve. Talk to them about it. "You know what I see that you are good at? I think you are good at this. Have you ever thought about doing this?" Pray for them to reach their potential. You can discern goals they need to be reaching for that maybe they have not figured out yet. You can say, "This is something I think you could do. This is something you need to try for." You could even begin to assume personal responsibility over the friendship because it is God ordained. Your close friends need to be ones God has picked. You can think of ways the two of you can work together. By doing that, it is going to take you to the next level.

The next level is intimate friendship. All of your close friendships cannot go into your intimate friendships. This is the dividing line. I was in a staff meeting at the church where I worked. The pastor said, "I have just been to a conference and I learned an interesting thing about working with people and having friends. I want to share it with you." He said there are four levels of friendships. At level one you meet people and you enjoy talking to them. You think you would like to know them better. Level two is where you begin to spend time with them and you discover you have a lot in common. You think you really like these people and you want to be better friends. Then you get into the close friendship stage, and that is the one where you start seeing their faults. You might think, "I didn't know they did that. I don't think I like that. I don't want to be around that." In order to go into an intimate friendship, you have to be able to say, "I know they do these things, and I am going to pray for them to change. I know they are trying to change. I really like them and I believe God wants us to have this friendship. I am just going to hang in there with all of these uncomfortable feelings that are going on." You might even be having disagreements. In order to get to level four, you have to be able to work past these problems, offenses, discussions, disagreements. You can never have a deep friendship unless you get past that level.

Once I had gotten involved in something that was really not a good thing. I had a friend come to me and say, "You know I love you and I am going to go through this with you." I thought "What a friend." Usually when you go through your hard time, you find out who your real friends are. Everyone else walks out the door. You are no longer important to them or what they need. You are in a place that they just do not want to be near you. Your real friends will still be there. It might surprise you who your real friends are. It might surprise you about who you thought was a friend and they are not. This deep level of intimate friendship, Level 4, is the sweetest and the best, and it is long lasting. You can have intimate friends and it can be just for a season. Maybe you are in the military and you move to Germany. You are over there now and you have great friends but you move on and they move on. We have some friends that we met in New York state when we lived there a long time ago, in the late 1960's. In and out through the years, we have lost contact with them or been in some contact with them. The summer before last, we had a lot of contact with them again and discovered we liked them just as much as ever. There is a real reason why you like your intimate friends. We had some other friends that we had not seen for 14 years because of something that happened in their life. They got anger and disassociated themselves from everyone. A real friend is loyal. A real friend hangs in there. I was just determined to hang in there even though they really did not want to talk to people. I just kept sending Christmas cards with no answer. To be a loyal friend you have to hang in there for years. You have to have long-term friendships that go on for years. Finally, after 14 years, we went to see them in San Francisco and spent time with them. The first 30 minutes were very awkward. After that it was like we had not seen them since last week. Fourteen years just went away. I asked my daughter, "How could that be? We had not seen them in 14 years." She said, "Mom, whatever attracted you to them in the first place and their personality is still there. You are still attracted to them." It is the truth, and now we are really good friends. I had an e-mail from her last week. She lives in Mexico now.

You have to be committed to the friendship with intimate friends, through the good times and the bad times. In Proverbs 18:24, it says, "There are friends who pretend to be friends, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." A lot of people read that and say, "That's Jesus." It is, but there are also human friends that will stick closer to you than your own family. Do not ignore that. Appreciate it. Treat it right. One of those intimate friends needs to be your mate. As I told you, I am really outgoing and I have a lot of friends. My husband is quiet and he does not need a lot of friends, but I am his friend. We are best friends. We are always working on our marriage to see if we can get it better. Recently he said, "We need to sit down and have a discussion about these six items in life and how we look at life and how we are doing." I told him, "I know exactly how you feel about every one of those." He said, "No you don't." I told him, "Yes I do. First one this. Second one this. Third one this. Fourth one this. Isn't that right." He said, "Yes." I said, "Okay, tell me how I feel about all six of those." He said, "That, that, that, that, and that." He is quiet and I am talkative, but we have great communication. A lot of people think I talk all of the time when I am at home. I do not. Our house is really quiet. We are quiet with each other.

Remember, as a Christian, you cannot have intimate friendship with people who are not friends of the Lord. By that I mean, not even worldly Christians. You need Christians for your intimate friends who challenge you and draw you deeper into God. You need friends who make you think, "Look at what they are doing. I need to get busy. I am just playing around here." Then you have to make up your mind that the people who reject Jesus Christ you are not going to be friends with. "I am not going to listen to Him be put down or cursed and use His name. I am not going to do it. I do not want to be around them."

Let God choose your friends. In fact, let's pray about it right now. Jesus, I need some friends. Would you bring some friends into my life? Jesus, could I have an intimate friendship with you? Show me how.

QUIET TIME QUESTIONS

1. How is God involved in each of the four levels of friendship?
2. Which levels is it important to have friends who are believers?
3. When you identify negative traits in someone, how should you be praying for that person?
4. Which verses from Proverbs 18 are pearls of wisdom to you?
5. How can you use knowledge about these levels and Proverbs 18 in developing friendships?

To watch the video on DISCERNING LEVELS OF FRIENDSHIP, Pillar Five, Relational Skills, go to www.bettyswann.com.

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