

Jesus, A Friend of Sinners

Jesus said, "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children" (Matthew 11: 18, 19). What a contrast! Jesus is pointing out that rumors reported that John the Baptist was possessed and He was a party animal. When rumors are circulated, the first casualty is truth. Because Jesus was kind toward overt sinners, He was branded. Please notice I use the word "overt," because we are all sinners, some are just more "covert" in their operations. The Pharisees were very strict in their outward religious show. One of their behavior patterns that brought much pride to their sinful hearts was their willingness to be obnoxious in the matters of fastings, i.e. doing without food to show their piety. Actually, all they managed to do was to show their self-admiration. Jesus not only willingly ate outside the times of prescribed fastings such as the Day of Atonement, but He willingly had dinner with people, even Gentiles, tax collectors and those who were overtly known as sinners. I love the answer of our Lord to these accusations: "But wisdom is justified of her children" (Matthew 11:19b). In other words, be wise and observe how the wisest of all men, the Lord Jesus makes disciples. He mixes with them showing His unconditional love (Romans 5:6-8), He calls them to repentance (Luke 5:30-32) and then they do not stay in a perpetual state of sinful action when converted as illustrated by our Lord in the encounter with the woman caught in adultery, "...And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (John 8:11). The only way to come to Jesus is as the invitational song says, "just as I am," however, no one ever stays just as they are when coming to Jesus; they are always changed as in the case of the maniac of Gadara, "Then they went out to see what was done; and came to Jesus, and found the man, out of whom the devils were departed, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, and in his right mind..." (Luke 8:35).

Think of it, Jesus wants to be our friend, but don't take my word for it; hear Him in John 15:15: "Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you."

In this vein, let us consider the effect of how the friendship with our Lord and from the Divine perspective affects us:

1. A friend enjoys your company.

The Bible says in Genesis 3:8, "And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden." Man was made for friendship with God. In the beginning, man was brought into partnership with God as evidenced in these words: "And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it... And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof" (Genesis 2:15, 19). We see God's original and universal intention for the man and woman is to be partnering with God in a garden. It appears that God takes on the anthropomorphic nature of a man just to walk with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8). Remember what Jesus told the thief who believed? "And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). This word "paradise" is a Persian transliteration that means, "walled garden." The most coveted garden in this analogy is a king's garden. John described Heaven as a city: "And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal" (Revelation 21:16). So we see the King of King's desire is to walk with us after this life in a city with four walls, each one measuring approximately 1,500 hundred miles long.

The Bible says of Enoch, father of Methuselah, "And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him" (Genesis 5:24). Many years ago, I heard Dr. B. R. Lakin say, "Enoch spent his days with God. One day God came to Enoch and said Enoch, 'I like the way you spend your days with Me on earth. Why don't you come up to heaven and spend the day with me up here?' And the reason Enoch never came back is because there is no night there. He is still spending the day with God." What an honor that God wants to befriend us and spend each and every day with us now and throughout all eternity!

2. A friend is in your face.

The Bible says of Moses, "And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face" (Deuteronomy 34:10). It is interesting to note that Moses had this face-to-face experience with the pre-incarnate Christ because the Bible says he esteemed the reproach of Christ. The key to Moses' endurance in the struggles of life are found in these words: "By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible" (Hebrews 11:27). I wonder if this verse was in the mind of Earl Morton when he pointed to John Knox's grave at his funeral and said, "There lies a man who never feared the face of any man." I might add, he was fearless because he feared God so thoroughly.

Our Lord in His immutability has not changed; he still wants to know us intimately. People who are not friends often only use acquaintances and seek what they may receive from their hand, whereas friends seek each other's face. The Psalmist said, "When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, LORD, will I seek" (Psalm 27:8). Paul requested, "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings..." (Philippians 3:10). Until we see His face in glory, we look into the Bible and with contemplative prayer to discover with the apostle, "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (II Corinthians 3:18). Let us therefore keep our hearts pure, so that we may, spiritually speaking, see our Lord's face, "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8).

3. A friend is not uncomfortable with your friendship.

A friend is not embarrassed to be called your friend. The Bible says, "And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God" (James 2:23). As in the case of Moses, we

see Abraham also had fellowship with the pre-incarnate Christ, because Jesus said, *"Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad"* (John 8:56). Jesus tells us to follow Him by taking up our cross (Matthew 16:24). Moses had no problem with any stigma attached to following His Lord: *"Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward"* (Hebrews 11:26). When people ask me in a critical spirit, "Whose camp are you in?" My reply is, *"Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach"* (Hebrews 13:13). Christ was in no one's camp or corner-He was outside the camp as a sanctified rebel against the religious hierarchy who were rejecting the revelation of God by favoring the traditions of man.

Our Lord will need to scold us and shape our lives into His plans. Therefore, we must not fight against His actions-we welcome all that He says and all that He does. *"Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful"* (Proverbs 27:6). *"...Wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city"* (Hebrews 11:16). God is not embarrassed of you, so do not be ashamed of Him. *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek"* (Romans 1:16). Be God's friend!

-Pastor Pope-