



Be Aware of Friends and Foes

SERIES: A Life That Counts: Studies in 2 Timothy

The true test of friendship usually comes in times of trouble. One such story took place during World War I. Jim and Philip had grown up together as best friends. They went to high school and college together, and afterwards they both enlisted in the Marines. They even ended up getting shipped off together to Germany where they fought side by side in the trenches. One sweltering day, during a fierce battle, amid heavy gunfire and bombing, they were given the command to retreat, but as they did Jim noticed that Philip hadn't returned with the others. He panicked and decided to go back after him. But as he climbed out of his trench, his commanding officer yanked him back and ordered him not to go. But when the officer turned his back, Jim was instantly gone to rescue his friend. A few minutes later, he staggered back, mortally wounded with his dead friend limp in his arms. The officer was outraged and yelled, "What a waste! He's dead and you're dying. It wasn't worth it." With almost his last breath, Jim replied, "Oh yes it was, Sir. I got there just in time for him to see me and say, 'Jim, I knew you'd come!'"

One of the true marks of a friend is that he's there when there is every reason for him not to be. It doesn't have to just be physical danger, it could be time constraints, or geographic distance, or even some barrier that person has put up in the relationship. Being a friend over the long haul is rarely simple. True friendship will almost always complicate our lives. There are risks and there are sacrifices. But a true friend will be there when he has every reason not to be.

As you read the NT, you can see that Paul was a man with many friends. There was his first Christian friend, Ananias. There were his traveling companions: Barnabas, Silas, Luke and John Mark. There was Titus of Antioch, Apollos of Alexandria, and Priscilla and Aquilla. Paul had many friends. But at the end of his life, when he sat in the darkness of a Roman prison awaiting execution, Paul felt vulnerable and alone. There were times that he wondered, "Where are all my friends now?"

Timothy was among Paul's friends too. But even that friendship was being tested. So at the end of chapter one, Paul tells Timothy about those fair-weather friends who had abandoned him and one particular friend who had demonstrated his loyalty. The message implicit in this is, "Timothy, you be the kind of friend who is there even when there is every reason not to be."

"You are aware of the fact that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes. The Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains; but when he was in Rome, he eagerly searched for me and found me - the Lord grant to him to find mercy from the Lord on that day-- and you know very well what services he rendered at Ephesus" (2 Tim. 1:15-18)

I. The commitment of a friend

We see here the basic commitment of a friend. It's brought home to us by way of contrast. First, there are those in Asia who have turned away from Paul; they've deserted him. We don't know exactly when that happened. Some say that he's speaking of those who had come to Rome from Asia, and when they had an opportunity to stand up and speak for Paul at his trial, they failed to show up. In chapter 4:16 he says, "**At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me...**" Others believe that Paul is talking about the time when he was arrested. We don't know for sure when this defection took place, but Timothy knew. He was in that very province of Asia where Paul's fair-weather friends came from. Some of these deserters might even be in Timothy's church there in Ephesus.

We can see something of Paul's state of mind here. When he says "all who are in Asia" he's not being strictly literal. Timothy as well as Onesiphorus and his household had not deserted him, and they were from Asia. There were undoubtedly others in Asia who were still loyal to the gospel and to Paul. But this is what happens to us, isn't it? We become discouraged and even depressed, and we begin to think all is lost. One commentator said this is an "exaggeration characteristic of depression." Everyone hadn't deserted Paul. Many had, but not everyone. But it felt like everyone. But just so we know he's not off his rocker, he gives us two names - Phygelus and Hermogenes. Paul is never reluctant to name names in his letters, even if it's in a negative context. We don't know anything else about these two guys, but Paul mentions them because they were likely the ringleaders. How would you like the one verse you get in Scripture to be one in which you're described as a deserter? But we're all leaving a legacy, and this is the legacy they left.

In contrast to these Asian deserters is a man named Onesiphorus. His name means “the bringer of profit” or “the bringer of help” and he certainly lived up to it! He was a true friend to Paul. He was there for Paul when he had every human reason not to be. He exemplified what the writer of Proverbs had in mind when he wrote, **“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity”** (17:17). Having said that, it’s important to note here that this man wasn’t just loyal to Paul out of sheer human friendship; he was loyal to Paul first and foremost out of his loyalty to Christ and his commitment to the gospel. He was a man whose life had been transformed by Christ. He was a man who had come to taste something of the perfect love of the greatest friend one can have. If we haven’t received that kind of love from God, it’s hard to give it. David Roper writes,

“Everyone needs love - it’s not good to be alone - but knowing that we’re deeply loved by God frees us from cursing others with our demands. The worst friends are those who need us in the worst sort of way. These are people who break our back (and our hearts) with their insatiable need to be loved. God’s love frees us from our compulsive need to accepted and loved and befriended, and sets us free to care about others. We may be hurt by coldness or indifference on their part, but we do not have to be controlled by it.”

Freed by God’s perfect love, we can be the kind of friend that Onesiphorus was to Paul. A friend who stays loyal even when there is every reason not to.

As you look at the example of Onesiphorus here you can see several actions of a true friend.

II. The actions of a friend

A. He is not ashamed: First, a true friend won’t be ashamed of you. Last week we saw how Paul told Timothy to choose suffering over shame. He said, **“Don’t me his prisoner...”** The two go together. Timothy couldn’t say, “Paul, I have no problem standing up for the Lord, but YOU I have a problem with.” There are times when the only way we really know of a person’s loyalty to Christ is whether or not he is loyal to Christ’s people. The two go together. There are people who say, “I’m a Christian. But I don’t like to be around Christians. I’m not ashamed of Christ, but his people really bug me.” Now, granted, there are times that Christians act in shameful ways. But so do we! In Paul’s case, he hadn’t acted in a shameful way, but his situation was such that some people might have thought he had. They were saying, “Look, he’s in prison. Where’s God’s power in his life? Where’s the

victory? Where’s his faith. Maybe God is punishing him.”

But Onesiphorus didn’t buy it. Paul says he was **“not ashamed of my chains.”** This is one of the tests of a friendship. When you might be tempted to be embarrassed or ashamed by your friend, you stick with him. You identify with him, though it might bring shame on yourself.

Jackie Robinson, of course, was the first African-American to play major league baseball. Almost every game, he had to face taunting crowds. One day while playing at home in Brooklyn, he committed an error at second base. He stood there humiliated while his own fans jeered. Then shortstop Pee Wee Reese came over and stood next to him. He put his arm around Jackie and faced the crowd. The fans grew quiet. Some time later, Robinson said that arm around his shoulder saved his career. A true friend won’t be ashamed to put his arm around you when everyone else boos.

B. He goes out his way: Second, a true friend goes out of his way. Paul says **“when I was in Rome, Onesiphorus eagerly searched for me and found me.”**

Paul wasn’t an easy man to find in Rome. Part of the city had been destroyed due to Nero’s fire. The number of Christians had been reduced due to persecution. Those left wouldn’t be eager to reveal Paul’s whereabouts to a stranger. We can imagine Onesiphorus treading the narrow alleyways of Rome, knocking on doors, asking where the imprisoned apostle was. Doors slammed shut; people whispered and pointed fingers; disapproving eyes watched, but he refused to give up. Those less devoted would have said, “I tried, but he’s no where to be found.” Not Onesiphorus. He was determined not to leave that city until he found Paul. Imagine the joy when Paul saw the familiar face at his prison door. “Onesiphorus, is that you? Oh thank God.”

A true friend will inconvenience himself for others. He’ll go out of his way. The great theologian Winnie the Pooh said it the best, “You can’t stay in your corner of the forest waiting for others to come to you. You have to go to them sometimes.” And you have to keep at it.

I can think of visits that I’ve made to the hospital over the years. Sometimes it can be hard to find someone in a hospital. Even if you can find them, you can be deterred by restricted visiting hours or pulled curtains or drug induced sleep. There have been times, I’m ashamed to say, when I haven’t tried hard enough. I’ve said to myself, “Well, at least I tried. At least I can tell them I was there and looked.” But a true friend is not just out to ease his guilty conscience by making a minimal effort. A true friend keeps looking.

C. He renders service: And he’s not just there in times of crisis. Paul says Timothy would remember the services Onesiphorus rendered at Ephesus. Paul had stayed in Ephesus for three years during his third missionary

journey. There was ample opportunity for Onesiphorus to be of service to Paul in the everyday. There are some friends who are like super heroes who swoop down to save us only when catastrophe strikes. That's not always bad, but sometimes we want to say, "Where were you when I just needed a ride to the store? Where were you when I just needed someone to watch my kids for an hour? Where were you when I just needed someone to listen over a cup of coffee?"

There needs to be a consistency in friendship. There needs to be service rendered in the little, everyday things that make up most of our lives. There needs to be maintenance, and not just major repairs. I have a friend in this church who I won't embarrass by mentioning his name. But we both love sports. We particularly love local sports - high schools and colleges. Rarely a week goes by that he doesn't leave the sports page of a local paper on my seat here at church, usually with some article circled that he thinks I would enjoy reading. He also knows I like to eat, so every once in a while he leaves me a few of his famous cookies as well. I don't know if that's what Paul had in mind when he said of Onesiphorus, "You know what services he rendered at Ephesus," but I know the small acts of giving are a big part of friendship. Blaise Pascal said a long time ago, "We can quite well give evidence of friendship, and acquire the reputation of kindly feeling, without giving anything."

D. He brings refreshment: All of this together leads us to the fourth thing a friend does - he brings refreshment. Once Onesiphorus found Paul he kept coming back. Paul says "he often refreshed me." This word is used nowhere else in the Bible. It means to cheer someone up, someone who is down. Paul was down. He wasn't always singing hymns in prison, like he had in Phillipi with Silas. He needed someone to cheer him up. The Phillips translation says, "He put fresh heart into me." A friend does that. A friend puts fresh heart into us. Again, there is a spiritual dimension to this. It's not just a human refreshment; it's a refreshment that comes from directing us back to the Lord.

One of the great friendships of the Bible is the one between David and Jonathan. Jonathan was a friend to David when he had every reason NOT to be. Jonathan was King Saul's son and heir to the throne. He might have viewed David as a rival, because David was God's choice for king, but Jonathan loved David like a brother. It was a friendship born for adversity. On one occasion, when David was in exile, hiding out from Saul, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life. David began to lose heart. But the Scripture says, "**Jonathan, Saul's son, arose and went to David at Horesh, and encouraged him in God**" (1 Sam. 23:16). Another translation says, "He helped David find strength in God." The best way to put it is "he helped him strengthen his grip on God."

This is the essence of Christian friendship. Beyond common interests, beyond fun times, beyond even years of

shared experiences, the real aim of friendship is to help us strengthen our grip on God. That's why we need to be around friends who influence us in that way.

There is a story about General William Westmoreland who was reviewing a platoon of paratroopers during the Vietnam war. As he went down the line he asked each trooper in turn, "How do you like jumping, son?" "I love it, Sir!" each one bellowed. When he came to the end of the line and asked the final soldier how he liked jumping, the man said, "I hate it, Sir!" "Then why do you jump?" the General asked. "Because I want to be *around* guys who jump!" he said.

That's why we need to be around brothers and sisters who jump for the Lord, because they'll encourage us to jump, and we'll encourage them to jump. Jerry White defines friendship: "A friend is a trusted confidant to whom I am mutually drawn as a companion and ally, whose love for me is not dependent on my performance, *and whose influence draws me nearer to the Lord.*" That's what Onesiphorus did for Paul.

Up until now we've focused on what it looks like to be a friend, but in this passage we also see the blessing that comes from being a friend.

III. The blessing of a friend

Twice Paul expresses his wish or desire or even prayer that God would "grant mercy" to Onesiphorus and his household. In v. 16 he asks for the Lord to grant mercy "**on the house of Onesiphorus.**" Why does he ask this for his family? Some say that Onesiphorus was dead; perhaps he'd lost his life in helping Paul. That's possible. Others say he was simply separated from them, and Paul just wanted the Lord's mercies on his friend's family while they were apart. Either way, Onesiphorus' ministry to Paul invoked in Paul a desire for the Lord's mercy to be upon them. Onesiphorus' family made a sacrifice, but there would also be a blessing that would result from him being a true friend to Paul. They'd experience the Lord's mercy. One of the unexpected things I've experienced as a result of being involved in ministry over the years is that my family has experienced the Lord's mercy in some unique ways. I think of the quality people they've been able to be around. I think of the answers to prayer they've seen and the provision of God in times of need. This is not just for pastors, this is for any believer who gives their lives to another.

But it's not just for his family. In v. 18 Paul expresses his desire that Onesiphorus himself will receive mercy, not now but in the day of judgment.

“found me” while in v. 18 he says “**may he find mercy from the Lord...**” Paul says, “**May he who found me find mercy from the Lord.**” It’s mercy for the merciful. Paul seems to know that in the day of judgment it will be the small acts of kindness and forgotten expressions of mercy that will be rewarded by the Lord.

CONCLUSION

In the back of Paul’s mind may be a story that Jesus told in the gospel of Matthew. It’s a story about sheep and goats. Jesus said that when he returns he’ll sit on his throne and judge the nations. He’ll put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left, and he’ll speak to both groups. When he speaks to the goats, it’s clear that some of them were surprised to be goats. They thought they were sheep. They said, “How come we’re over here on the left?” Jesus said, “I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.” They were confused and asked, “You’ve got to be kidding. We never saw you. We never did that.” Then he explained that to the extent that they didn’t do it to one of the least of his friends, they didn’t do it to Him.

sheep are just as confused as the goats. Jesus said to them, “I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.” This left the sheep scratching their heads, “Lord, when did we do all those things for you? We never saw you.” Jesus answered, “To the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.” This tells me that on the day of judgment there will be mercy for those who showed up when there was every reason not to. It will be the little unremembered acts of mercy and love that we hardly think about that are important to Jesus.

I can see it now, Onesiphorus standing before the king of kings, saying, “Lord, when did I visit you in prison?” And I can almost hear the king say, “To the extent that you did it to one of these friends of mine, even Paul, you did it to me.”

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