

Friendship

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[0 : 0 0] Well, at both our services today, I want us to think about two common mistakes or traps that I think we can fall into as humans. Two mistakes that can affect every day of our lives. The first is when we make the mistake of thinking that we are bad at something, when in actual fact we are quite good at it. So that could be anything, cooking, playing a musical instrument, painting, public speaking. Often we can be very hard on ourselves and I know, I've got no doubt that there's many people in here who are far more gifted and talented than they often realise. The second mistake is the opposite. When we think we're good at something, when in reality we're not. So for me, two examples of that would be singing and dancing. When I'm in the car, singing along to my music, in my head I sound like Bruce Springsteen. Same with dancing, when no one in the world can see me, I would definitely get seven or eight out of ten on Strictly. But if people could actually see me and actually hear me, well, I'm not sure they'd agree with my optimistic self-assessment. Another example of these two mistakes is bagpipes. So I've often heard it said that some of the very best pipers in Lewis will hardly ever play in front of people. And yet if you go to

Edinburgh onto the Royal Mile, you'll hear pipers playing for the whole city centre to hear them. And I'm no piper, but even I can hear that it's not always the highest standard.

Humanity is prone to thinking that we're bad at things we're actually good at and that we're good at things we're actually bad at. And these two mistakes can actually lead to many of the problems that we see around us in the world. So on the one hand you've got people who struggle with low self-esteem, a fear of failure and consequently a huge amount of potential goes unfulfilled in people's lives. But on the other hand you've got people who are far too hasty, far too sure of their own opinions and they jump in with both feet and they only realise that they're out of their depth when the damage has been done.

And the result is that you can get people who are terrified to let their guard down and you can have people who are desperately trying to prove themselves. And I'm sure for all of you you can think of examples of these mistakes in your own lives and in the lives of others. I would like us today to look at two specific examples of these mistakes that are very relevant to our lives as followers of Jesus. Tonight we're going to look at a topic that we often think that we're good at but in reality we are bad at it. But you have to come along tonight or join online if you want to find out what it is. This morning we're going to look at the first mistake, the mistake of thinking that you're bad at something that you are actually good at. And we're going to focus on a specific example that is a massive part of life. It's a part of life that affects everyone from preschool, right through the school years, into university or college or training, into the workplace, in the community and even into old age. It's a topic that runs right through life, it's a topic that runs right through the Bible as well. We're going to think about friendship.

Friendship is something that very often we think we're going to be bad at. But in reality it's something that you can be very, very good at. And to help us we're going to turn back to John chapter 12 verses 1 to 3. Six days before the Passover Jesus therefore came to Bethany where Lazarus was whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table.

[4 : 10] Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Now you might be thinking to yourself, well Thomas, I don't really think that I'm bad at friendship. And this is not really an issue in my life. And if you do think that then that's great because that's what I want you to think. I don't want you to think that you're bad at friendship. But whether we think we're bad at friendship or not, I do think it's the case that very often we behave as though we think it. Let me give you some examples. So we all know that good friendship does not care about appearance or possessions. We'd all agree with that. Yet are there times when you're nervous that your clothes aren't up to scratch or that your house isn't tidy enough? Good friendship is never about being the most successful or the best looking. Yet are there times when you feel a need to impress other people so that they're like you? Good friendship is about being open and honest with one another. Yet are there parts of your life that you never want other people to see and where you'll never let your guard down? Good friendships are about relaxing together but are there times when hospitality causes you stress? Good friendships are about being together. Yet are there times when you think to yourself, everybody else would probably be having a much nicer time if I had just stayed at home? We can very easily live each week of our lives, niggled or even crippled by the feeling that friendship is something that we're just not that good at. Well if you are falling into that trap and if you sometimes feel like that, which I know I do and I'm sure all of us do, then

I hope that this morning is going to help us all to see that friendship isn't just something that some people are good at, it is something that every single one of us has been made for. So first of all I want us to think through some of the key elements of friendship and we can see these if we look a little bit more closely at the verses that are before you on the screen. Here Jesus is having a meal with three of his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus and there's some other people there as well and I want us to just pick out four things that we can see in these verses and that I would say are all key aspects of friendship.

Number one is people. Now that seems very obvious, friendship always involves people and here in Lazarus's house there are various people there but the key thing I want to highlight is that they're all different and even Martha, Mary and Lazarus who are siblings in the one family are different. You've got Martha who's always busy, always serving, always on the go, always aware of the needs of other people and the needs around her.

Then you've got Mary who's captivated by Jesus and who seems oblivious to the needs around her. She's quite willing to do something extravagant and almost sort of socially slightly odd like she does with this perfume as we read and then you have Lazarus who we don't know much about but my guess is that Lazarus was quite a quiet person because as far as I know the Bible never records anything that he says. So even in one family you've got all these different personalities and yet here they are with Jesus and they're his friends and it's the same with the disciples and other people that Jesus meets. They're all different and yet they are his friends. Second thing we see is that they are together. We've got the people there and they're together. Again it seems so obvious but it's so important.

Here you have Jesus approaching the last week of his life, the climax of everything that the eternal plan of God, the Old Testament and his own life and ministry have been pointing towards and yet here he is enjoying the company of his friends. They're having a meal and at the heart of Jesus' life again and again and again you can see that he loved company.

[8 : 54] He met people, he spoke to people, he ate with people and he didn't care that some people were horrified at the kind of company that he was choosing and even when Jesus went off to be on his own it was because he wanted to pray and enjoy time together with his father.

At the heart of friendship is enjoying one another's company. The different personalities of people are not to be kept apart, they're to be together in one another's company. Third thing we see is sharing. So in friendships you have different people who come together at each other's company and that means they are sharing their lives with one another and here you have Jesus sharing with his friends, they're sharing their food, they're sharing their time and in doing so they would have shared their laughter, their tears, their successes, their struggles, their joys, their burdens, their opinions, their hopes just like all other friends do. Friendship means that different personalities come together, enjoy each other's company and their lives become interwoven together. That's what it's like for you, your lives are interwoven with your friends' lives and how precious must that have been for Mary,

Martha and Lazarus, their lives were woven in with Jesus' life as they shared together. Which is what brings us to the fourth thing, here we have an example of precious moments.

I want you to imagine being in this house, okay? Jesus is there around the dinner table with his friends. Imagine you're there, you can hear conversation, discussion, laughter, there's lovely food there, great company but at the same time there's probably an edge of fear and uncertainty because they all know that opposition to Jesus is rising. And so there's the buzz of the meal and the conversation and everything that's going on and then all of a sudden it's interrupted by the sound of broken pottery and moments later the room is filled with an intense and beautiful fragrance. You can smell it and you turn and you see that Mary is anointing Jesus' feet and you realise that she has just opened a bottle of perfume that is worth today's equivalent of thousands of pounds. You see Judas looking on in disgust as he objects to what's going on. You hear Jesus defend her telling everyone to leave Mary alone. What a moment, a moment that these friends would never ever forget.

And of course the precious moment would not have happened without the people, without the togetherness, without the sharing of their lives. And that's why in many ways these four things that we can pick out of these three verses combine to give us a summary of what friendship is all about. We can put these together to say that friendship is about people together sharing precious moments. I hope that that's a helpful summary of friendship. It's very short and maybe later on today you can chat together or think a bit more as to whether you know a definition of friendship, whether it's enough or whether we need more, that's something to think about. But I think at least it shows us that here in Lazarus' house you get a beautiful reminder of some of the key elements of friendship. But you might be thinking well yes Thomas all that's fine but these are great Christians. This is Mary, Martha and Lazarus. The whole Christian church knows about these people. I'm not like that. And if I had been there it would have probably spoiled the moment. It's so easy to think

[12:53] I wish I was better at friendship but I'm just not cut out for it. If you feel like that I can understand why you do. And sometimes the bruises of life whether it's at school when people give you a hard time or when at work you maybe feel like you're not quite in with the kind of key friendship group in the workplace or in the community or whatever it may be. It's so easy for things in life to make us feel like we're just not good at it. So if you feel like that I understand I've often felt it myself. What I want to show you today is that theologically it's totally untrue. And to see this we need to keep hold of what we've seen in this passage and at the same time we need to go all the way back to Genesis one and the creation of humanity. Now back in the beginning in Genesis one we learned that the key feature that distinguishes humanity from every other part of creation is that we are made in the image of God. That's why I wanted to highlight that to the kids.

That's why I want to highlight it to you. That means that the distinctive element there's a distinctive element of our humanity or distinctive elements in our humanity that reflect the nature and character of God. In other words there's stuff about you that's like God. And we see aspects of what that means in Genesis one and two. We get the full picture of what that means when we look at the life of Jesus. Never forget that Jesus doesn't just show us what God is really like. Jesus also shows us what humanity is really meant to be. And the key thing I want us to recognize is that these elements of friendship that we see in John 12 they're not skills and gifts that certain people have and other people don't.

They're actually key elements of what it means to be a human made in the image of God. So let me go back through these one by one. We said that friendship involves people, different individuals, different personalities. That's an element of bearing the image of God. One of the great distinctives of Christianity is that it's not polytheistic so we don't believe in many gods. And at the same time we don't believe that God is just this single isolated solitary entity. The doctrine of the Trinity avoids both of these things and it's unique to Christianity. It means that within the one God there are three persons Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We described that by saying that God and that in God there are three persons and one nature. That means that within the unity of God there is a plurality of persons each of whom is unique. The Father, the Son and the Spirit are all God but the

Father's not the Son. The Son's not the Spirit. The Spirit is not the Father nor the Son. And so in God you have distinct persons in unity together and the wonderful diversity of individual human persons reflects that. That's why you are you and not someone else.

The distinction of individual personalities within humanity is one of the ways that we are made in the image of God. In our personness we bear the image of God. We said that friendship involves togetherness. Differed persons enjoying being together. That is most definitely true of God. There has never been a moment when God has not been Father, Son and Spirit. Don't ever think that it was the Father first and then a wee while later the Son came and then a wee while later the Spirit came. Not through. Never ever a moment when God has not been Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That means that for all eternity there's been a beautiful perfect togetherness in God. John describes that magnificently in verse 18 of chapter 1. He says he speaks about God the Son being at the Father's side. That literally in Greek is that the Son is in the bosom of the Father. At the very core of who God is there is a beautiful togetherness. And that of course is why the cross was so horrific because in that moment and for the first time in eternity God the Son was separated from his Father.

[17:30] But this togetherness that we see in God is reflected in the joy of human togetherness. And you know what that is like when you come and see friends and see family and get to enjoy being together again. There is something so beautiful in that. No wonder that's exactly how God has made us. He's not made us to be alone. He said in the creation it's not good that man should be alone. Humanity is made for relationships. Humanity is made to enjoy one another's company in our togetherness. We bear the image of God. We said that friendship involves sharing. Different people sharing time together, sharing their lives together and their experiences are all interwoven. That is spectacularly true of God. In God you have Father, Son and Holy Spirit and there's a beautiful, wonderful sharing of life within the three persons of the one through God. Shared nature, shared character, shared power, shared wisdom, shared goals, shared plans, shared intimacy, shared glory and above all else, shared love. The very life and being of God is beautifully interwoven between Father,

Son and Spirit. And I wish I could describe that better. I think the closest we can get is to look at some of the most spectacular discoveries of science. So you look at the balance of gravity, light and motion that holds the galaxies together in space or the balance of colour, texture and fragrance that makes a flower so beautiful. All of that's a declaration of the glory of God. And the interweaving of our human lives is a reflection of that. In fact the whole survival of humanity depends on the interweaving of a husband and a wife in order for children to be born. But that need for togetherness goes beyond just biology or reproduction. We're made to be together, to enjoy one another's company, to share our lives together. In other words it's impossible for humans to be what God wants us to be if we just live in isolation. The core elements of bearing God's image, things like communication, relationships, taking responsibility, caring for one another, all of that involves sharing life together. It's impossible to fulfil our calling to bear

God's image without friendship. In our sharing we bear the image of God. And we said that friendship enjoys precious moments, again that's so true of God. You only need to read the first page of the Bible to see that. When God created the universe as each aspect of his creation came into existence again and again God said that it was good. God enjoyed those precious moments as creation bit by bit came into being. And throughout scripture we read of moments and occasions when God takes great delight. As we enjoy precious moments together we bear the image of God. And all of that is telling us that friendship is a key aspect of the way in which we are to bear God's image, to be the people that he wants us to be. Friendship is a key part of being human and that's why it's no surprise that it's a key part of the Bible's message. In fact you can sum up the whole Bible by saying that it's telling us about how our friendship with God was lost and is now being restored through the death and resurrection of Jesus. And the reason I'm saying all of this and the reason I want to highlight is to say that friendship is not a skill or talent that you need to gain or that some people have and other people don't. It's so easy to think that friendship is something that you aren't cut out for. That is not true.

Friendship is something that you have been made for. You've been made to be good at it.

Now obviously sin spoils that and many friendships have been ruined by sin. But you must never forget that sin is a distortion of what you've been made to be. So sin does not mean that you can't be good at friendship but it is something that has to be addressed in order to fulfil the potential that God has created us with. It's a bit like a sportsman who suffers an injury. So you think of Andy Murray. Is Andy Murray good at tennis when he's injured?

[22 : 42] Well you say yes he is but the injury needs to be dealt with because injury isn't compatible with the highest level of tennis. Sin is the same. It's an issue that always needs to be dealt with because there's never a moment when grumpiness or selfishness or arrogance or anything else that ruins friendship is compatible with being a Christian. But the key point is that you weren't made to be any of those things. These things are a distortion of what God has made you to be. And that's because behind the sin and mistakes that we make there lies a person made in the image of God made to be brilliant at friendship.

And all of that means that if anybody here thinks that you're not good at friendship or you're not cut out to be a good friend then you are actually wrong. You're made for friendship. You're made to be a good friend to others. That means you are made to be a wonderful part of someone else's life. You are made to be a wonderful part of someone else's life. If humanity needs friendship then that means that you are what other people need. In friendship you have got so much to give. You've got so much to gain. So why is all this important and why am I saying all this today? Well we've been saying that at the heart of friendship is people together sharing precious moments. We've been saying that that's a key aspect of how we bear the image of God. It's not something that some people are good at. It's what we're all made for. And the reason this is so important is this. The message of the Bible is about how friendship with God was created, lost and is now being restored. And the whole message of the Bible is centred on Jesus Christ who came to conquer sin, to undo the damage that sin has caused and to restore humanity back to what we were created to be. Jesus is establishing a new humanity where we're being restored.

After the image of our Creator and a key part of that restoration is that a beautiful friendship would be restored between humanity and God and between fellow humans. The cross restores our relationship vertically with God. It also restores our relationship horizontally with one another. That's why in the new creation when Jesus returns there will be such a perfect experience of friendship. In other words, everything that God is aiming towards is a beautiful picture of friendship. In the new creation, in eternity, when our relationship with God is restored and when our relationship with one another is restored. And if you could see that right now you'd be like, wow, what a perfect, beautiful, wonderful picture of friendship. The key point is that there is a place today that should give us a glimpse of that day. So if the future that God has for us in the new creation is of perfect friendship, there's a place where that needs to be seen today. There's a place where we get a glimpse of then, now. And that place is the church. And that's why the church is a place where friendship should absolutely thrive. At the heart of our church there needs to be people together sharing precious moments. That should shape our worship as we come together as friends with a shared love for Jesus and for one another. That should shape our discipleship as we help one another grow in faith and it should shape our mission. We need to go out into our community and we need to make friends with people. And don't think for one second that you can't do it or that you're not good at it. You are. You're made for it. So whether you are young or old, single or married, confident or shy, quiet or chatty, you as the person that you are, you're all made to be brilliant friends to others. We're made to be people together sharing precious moments. Don't believe the lie that you're bad at it. Hold on to the theological truth that you are made for it. And with that theological truth in our minds, all we need to do is go for it. So forget about whether your clothes are up to scratch.

Don't worry about the tidiness of your house and God does not care whether you can offer a roast dinner or pizza and crisps. None of that matters. Jesus began a ministry of friendship.

He met people. He ate with people. He spent time with them. He enjoyed being with them. His life was full of examples where he was among people together sharing precious moments.

[28 : 29] He started that ministry. Our job this week is to keep it going. Amen. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for the wonderful gift of friendship. And we pray that friendship would thrive among us in our church and beyond us into the community. Help us to remember that this is what you've made us for. And help us to see the power of friendship in terms of furthering the gospel. Thank you for the wonderful gift of friends. May our friendships deepen and grow as we love one another and love you more. And Lord Jesus, we just thank you so much that you began that ministry. That you came to be the friend of tax collectors and sinners. You spoke with them. You ate with them. You shared precious moments with them. You began that ministry. We want to carry it on. We pray for your help.

And we especially pray for any here or any in our community who are isolated and lonely. Please give us eyes to see these needs. And please help us to extend the wonderful friendship that your word is teaching us to live in. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.