



FRIENDSHIP IN THE BIBLE: THE RIGHT WAY TO FIND GODLY FRIENDS



TAYLOR HARTLEY

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	4
PART I: WHAT IS A BAD FRIEND?.....	6
PART II: WHAT IS A GOOD FRIEND?.....	12
PART III: HOW TO FIND FRIENDS	19
PART IV: DON'T FEAR YOUR FRIENDS	25
CONCLUSION.....	28
END NOTES.....	29



INTRODUCTION

“I don’t think we should be friends anymore,” Neil said to me. To my sixth-grade ears, these were the worst words I had ever heard, and they were uttered by my best friend. Neil and I had been close ever since the first day of first grade. I still remember meeting him in the cafeteria and being ever so relieved that I had made a friend. My grandma’s house was between his house and mine, and we often convened there on our four-wheelers only to then take off on all kinds of adventures together. We dribbled the air out of the basketball playing one-on-one and horse, spent every weekend at each other’s houses, and were nearly inseparable at school.

And yet here we were at the end of our final week of elementary school, right before our class would crash into three other sixth-grade classes from other schools to create one big seventh-grade class. . . and I had lost my best friend.

Have you ever heard the phrase, “You never know what you have until it’s gone?” How often in my life has that little saying proven so true. My middle school years were terrible. I didn’t really have any friends, and I experienced a lot of bullying. Those years helped me realize how important friends are—and how deeply we need them. Even friendship in the Bible is often portrayed as a lifeline, showing us that godly companionship is part of God’s design for our good.

Have you ever been without friends? Are you without friends now? If so, you’re in the right place. This life skill guide is all about helping you know how to find good friends—and not just good ones, but godly ones. After

FIELD GUIDE

all, friendship in the Bible is never treated as optional. God often cares for His people through relationships, and friendship in the Bible repeatedly highlights how faithful companions help us walk toward heaven with endurance.

We will begin by considering what makes a bad friend bad. This may seem strange given that the goal of this guide is to help you make good, godly friends. But in order to know what godly friendships look like, we need to get our arms around what bad friendships look like and what effect they have on us. Next, we will consider what good (godly) friendships are, only to then think through some ways we can gain these kinds of friends. Lastly, we will look inwardly in order to determine how we can be better friends for those whom the Lord has given us.

I pray that this guide will serve you as you seek to gain godly friendships. I also pray that through this process, you are challenged to be a better friend for those whom the Lord has given you—because friendship in the Bible consistently shows us that loving, faithful companions shape our spiritual growth more than we often realize.

1

WHAT IS A BAD FRIEND?

The number of attributes that could be employed to describe a bad friend are many. We will limit ourselves to three: selfish, foolish, and angry. At the root of each of these is pride. When you look at bad friendship patterns—whether in life, literature, or even friendship in the Bible—you quickly notice that pride is usually the engine driving them.

Selfish Friends

I am a big fan of *The Lord of the Rings* (books and movies). I've read the books multiple times, and one of my favorite winter night activities is to put on a movie marathon where my wife and I watch all three movies. Okay, okay, we watch the first one (maybe one and a half) and then sleep through most of the other two. You get the point. If you've never read or watched *The Lord of the Rings*, let me be a good friend to you and excuse you from this guide so that you may go remedy this right now!

In Tolkien's story of Frodo's harrowing journey to Mordor, we get an example of a bad friend in Boromir, son of the Steward of Gondor. Boromir, along with nine others, is commissioned to assist Frodo in destroying the Ring in the fires of Mount Doom. Fresh out of Rivendell, Boromir appears to be exactly the kind of friend Frodo needs, given that Frodo is small and yet burdened with a great purpose. Boromir, on the other hand, is strong and a fierce warrior. He can protect Frodo from Sauron and his servants. Indeed, that is what Boromir sets out to do.

FIELD GUIDE

Things break down in the fellowship when Boromir attempts to take the Ring from Frodo in order to use it for his own purposes. Boromir, driven by selfish ambition, betrayed the one person whom he had taken an oath to protect. Have you ever experienced a breakdown in friendship because someone was selfish? This is one of the classic qualities of friendship gone wrong—when loyalty is replaced by self-interest.

The apostle James tells us that selfishness, along with jealousy, leads to “disorder and every vile practice” (Jas. 3:16). In order to understand the relationship between selfishness and disorder and vile practice, we first need to understand what selfishness is. Here is my armchair definition: selfishness is putting one’s own interest first because one believes they are better than the rest and, therefore, worthy of it all. Here we have action and motivation, both of which are essential if we’re to properly understand what selfishness is. Selfish people don’t put their own interests ahead of others—they do so because they think they’re better than others. Selfishness fundamentally denies equality.

As friendship advice, Scripture warns us repeatedly about selfish friends who sow chaos wherever they go. Even friendship in the Bible—think of Saul’s jealousy toward David or Judas’s betrayal—shows that when selfishness rules the heart, relationships crumble and people get hurt.

And herein lies why selfishness is so toxic to friendship. A selfish friend, who sees themselves as better than others, will justify using and abusing their friends for their own gain. And what kind of gain do selfish people seek? The disorderly and vile kind. You see, selfishness doesn’t just name one’s orientation to others but also to God. God exists to serve their interest and not the other way around. This kind of person is totally turned in on himself. By failing to recognize God’s supreme worth and others’ equal worth, the selfish person enthrones himself as most worthy. Everyone else, God included, exists to serve them and never the other way around. It’s no surprise that toxic friends are so often shaped by this inward turn—they leave a trail of harm because they believe only their desires matter.

Foolish Friends

THE RIGHT AND WRONG WAY TO FIND GODLY FRIENDS

What comes to your mind when you think of a fool? Maybe someone who constantly makes bad decisions? I know a few people who match that description! However, making bad decisions is too broad a descriptor to identify what makes someone foolish and, therefore, a bad friend.

Solomon, while writing about wisdom for his sons, said that “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:7; emphasis mine). The difference between having knowledge and despising it is properly orienting oneself to God. The knowledgeable person knows that all truth belongs to God and that they must submit themselves to God in fear if they are to be wise. The fool, on the other hand, fatally assumes that they already possess knowledge and need only to look within in order to know what to do. This is the truest definition of a know-it-all. According to Solomon, failing to recognize that knowledge comes from God is equivalent to despising knowledge straightaway.

Now apply foolishness to friendship. How might the assumption that one possesses all necessary knowledge within themselves produce toxicity in friendship? Well, for one, it isn’t true! No one is exempt from needing God in order to know the truth about God, themselves, and the world. No one actually knows it all. Scripture consistently warns against toxic friendships, and foolishness is one of the main ways those relationships become destructive. Even when you examine friendship in the Bible, whether in the cautionary stories of Job’s companions or the tragic misguidance of Amnon’s friend Jonadab, foolish counsel often leads to devastation.

But let’s go one step further in thinking about foolishness and friendship. Just as selfishness results from a person turning inward, unable to properly see God and man, foolishness works the same way. The difference, of course, is that selfishness is primarily related to desire, whereas foolishness relates to knowledge. The point is that a turned-in person can’t see God and others accurately and, therefore, cannot serve others meaningfully. A foolish friend will speak and act in ways that do not encourage those around them with truth about God or this world. Worse still, a foolish friend’s foolishness will often be offered out of self-interest. A fool acts according to his gut and looks no further than his nose. That is hardly a winning combination in friendship—indeed, it is a breeding

FIELD GUIDE

ground for toxic friends whose influence pulls others downward rather than building them up.

Angry Friends

Have you ever known someone who had an uncontrollable temper? I have. And you know what? Angry people do not feel safe, and I do not enjoy my time with them. I don't think I am unique in that assessment. In fact, I don't know anyone who would honestly say that they enjoy time spent with someone who always seems... well, hacked off.

My son is sixteen months old, and he is mostly a very happy chappy. As long as the blueberries never run out and the batteries in his sing-along book never die, my boy lives in the clouds somewhere near nine. There are times, however, when big emotions come over him and he, being only as old as he is, acts a bit irrationally. He closes his eyes, lets out some screams, arches his back, and if he is in his highchair, look out because food is going to fly! These are usual expressions of anger for babies. My job as his dad is to help him process his frustration and grow beyond such expressions.

I don't often see full-grown adults expressing their anger like sixteen-month-old babies do. But that doesn't mean that adults don't express anger in ways that are equally disruptive, especially in the context of friendship. Sometimes angry people do shout, while other times they pout. Sometimes angry people make passive-aggressive comments, and other times, they alienate others to punish them. It's not hard to see how these expressions alone would make friendship challenging. But in order to get an even better idea of why anger is toxic to friendship, we need to get under these expressions and consider what anger is itself.

It shouldn't come as a surprise to you that anger roots in the same thing as selfishness and foolishness—pride—an over-inflated, over-concerned, over-interested focus on self. Whereas selfishness and foolishness play offense, anger is a defensive mechanism. It is what arises within a prideful person when things don't go their way. An angry person may be fine to be around until things go pear-shaped, then all bets are off.

THE RIGHT AND WRONG WAY TO FIND GODLY FRIENDS

The Bible has a lot to say about anger. While there is a category for righteous anger, much more ink do the writers of Scripture spill on anger in relation to sin. Some examples may help. James writes, “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (Jas. 1:19–20). Also consider Paul’s words to the Ephesian church: “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice” (Eph. 4:31). Jesus even teaches his disciples that anger is equal to murder in God’s eyes (Matt. 5:21–22)!

What we gather from these passages is that anger is serious business and is seriously destructive to the person contending with it and to everyone around them. This is why friendship in the Bible warns against forming bonds with those who harbor anger. Solomon advises, “Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare” (Prov. 22:24–25). That warning itself becomes one of the clearest examples of friendship in the Bible, showing how Scripture shapes our understanding of wise relationships.

Angry people are prideful people who lash out when those around them do not share their evaluations of themselves and contribute to their wants in this world. Angry people, in other words, make rubbish friends. Such examples of broken relationships only reinforce how friendship in the Bible points us toward gentleness, humility, and self-control as necessary foundations for healthy community.

What Do I Do If I Currently Have Bad Friends?

Here is an all-too-short answer to the question of what to do if you currently find yourself with bad friends. First off, be warned. Paul writes, “Do not be deceived. ‘Bad company corrupts good morals’” (1 Cor. 15:33). If your friends are characterized by their pride showing itself in the form of selfishness, foolishness, anger, or all the above, you need to be warned. Their pride can easily rub off on you. That’s what Solomon was saying to his sons when he spoke of the snare of the angry person that entangles — yet another reminder of the pattern we see throughout friendship in the Bible, where companions shape us toward either wisdom or ruin.

FIELD GUIDE

Secondly, surround and supplement bad friendships with good ones! More on that in the next three sections.

Thirdly (a), you may need to limit or remove bad friends from your life. Proceed with caution. There is a difference between imperfect friends (of which you are one, and so am I!) and bad friends. Don't hold your friends to the standard of perfection. Doing so would make you a hypocrite, and it would also require those around you to give what they can't give. Only One is perfect—the Lord Jesus.

Thirdly (b), if you think you need to limit or remove a friend from your life, seek counsel! Ask a wise person in your life (parent, good friend, mentor, elder, etc.) for advice on handling that situation. Share with them your reasoning. See whether they may help you identify problems that you are contributing to a sour friendship. Just don't make this decision alone. We are too easily convinced that we see the playing field clearly and know the right thing to do. Seeking counsel can prevent us from making bad decisions where people get hurt. Even this principle reflects friendship in the Bible, where counsel, community, and accountability are presented as guardrails that protect us from destructive choices.

Reflection Questions:

1. Do you struggle with any of these traits (selfishness, foolishness, pride) that make for a bad friend?
2. Can you think of a time when a friendship you had was negatively impacted by one of these traits? Share with your mentor an example.
3. How does pride lie at the root of each of these traits?

2

WHAT IS A GOOD FRIEND?

There are a lot of characteristics that go into a good friend. As in the last section, however, we will stick to three of the most important ones you should look for in your friends: loyalty, honesty, and love. These qualities form the backbone of friendship in the Bible, and they are the same qualities we should pursue today.

A Loyal Friend

Remember Boromir? He wasn't a good friend to Frodo because he was selfish and wanted the Ring for his own purposes. Frodo did have a good friend, however—Samwise Gamgee. For all you *Lord of the Rings* fans out there, you knew this was coming. For everyone else, hang with me, and I'll make this quick.

Samwise was a hobbit like Frodo. He was small, slightly round, and overall unassuming. Though without any remarkable traits, Samwise was a better friend than Frodo could have possibly asked for. For one thing, when Frodo discovered he had to leave the Shire and head toward the fires of Mount Doom, Sam didn't even hesitate. There was no way Frodo was going anywhere without him. Throughout their journey, Sam ensured Frodo ate, rested, and stayed protected from dangers on every side.

There was even that harrowing moment when Sam threw himself into the river to chase after Frodo shortly after the Fellowship broke apart. Sam couldn't swim, but he would not allow Frodo to go on alone. And, of course, there's the unforgettable moment on Mount Doom when Frodo could no longer continue. Sam lifted him onto his back, crying, "I can't carry it (the Ring) for you, but I can carry you!" Chills just thinking about it.

FIELD GUIDE

What do you gather from all this? If you’re the Frodo of your own story—without the Ring, the monsters, and the fate of the world—you should want a friend like Samwise Gamgee beside you. A good friend is someone who will defend you, protect you, remain with you, and fight for you. A good friend is a loyal friend, and loyalty is one of the central qualities of a good friend.

Do you value loyalty in a friend? As we will see in our next point, a loyal friend is not someone who blindly agrees with everything you say or affirms everything you do. That kind of loyalty would actually belong in the “bad friend” category. No, a loyal friend—the kind you should aspire to be and seek to have—is someone committed to your good and willing to walk with you as you pursue it.

Sometimes what is good for us involves addressing the not-so-flattering parts of ourselves. Loyal friends are not ignorant of our weaknesses, nor do they look away. Instead, they stay the course and care for us as we grow. This kind of steadfastness beautifully reflects loyalty in friendship as we see friendship in the Bible lived out among God’s people.

Solomon makes this clear when he writes, “Do not forsake your friend and your father’s friend, and do not go to your brother’s house in the day of your calamity. Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away” (Prov. 27:10). What makes the neighbor better than a brother is his proximity—which, in friendship terms, looks like loyalty. Loyalty is sticky. It is the bond that keeps two friends close, even when circumstances try to pull them apart.

Loyalty says, “This situation is hard, but I am more committed to you than to whatever comfort I might gain by walking away.” Loyalty doesn’t give up, and it doesn’t give in when things get difficult. A good friend is loyal—and learning how to be a good friend starts with cultivating that same steadfastness toward others.¹

An Honest Friend

Last night at our dinner table, a friend held out the following scenario, followed by a question. The scenario: you’re out eating a meal with friends, and one of your friends happens to notice that you have a bit of food on

THE RIGHT AND WRONG WAY TO FIND GODLY FRIENDS

your face. The question is whether your friend should say something to you or let it be in hopes of not embarrassing you. My wife was quick to answer that she would much prefer someone to tell her that something was on her face. In fact, she said she would be upset to know that someone else knew she was compromised by ketchup and didn't tell her! My wife wants honesty. You should as well.

Honesty is a funny thing, though. It's easy to want and simultaneously hard to receive. That's one reason why Solomon likens a friend's honesty to "wounds" (Prov. 27:6). Though he calls them "faithful," he admits that a friend's honesty hurts in some sense like a wound. Have you ever been stung by someone telling you the unflattering truth about yourself?

I recently had a dear friend tell me that I can be hard to work with because I am too committed to my way of doing things. That stung. It still stings. You know what stings the most? The fact that he was right—I can be that way. And while I knew that already in some sense, his directness and honesty helped me see more clearly that this part of me needs to change. My pride still stings, but my heart is glad for his willingness to tell me the truth.

Receiving criticism isn't easy, but it's important because we don't always see ourselves clearly. We need people to watch our blindside and point out when there's a problem. And not just anyone... we need friends to do this for us. After all, if friends who love you can't tell you the truth, who can? Or to say it differently, who would you rather hear the tough stuff from—someone who you know loves you and is loyal to you, or someone you're suspicious of or don't know that well? There should be safety for the truth within the high walls of committed friendship. Within those walls, you should seek to have a friendship where iron can sharpen iron, and both you and your friend can grow (Prov. 27:17).

It's not only criticism that you need to hear from your friends, though. You also need their godly encouragement. Too often, we think of encouragement as being synonymous with flattery, but this should not be. A friend once told me that flattery is saying to someone what you wouldn't say about them when they aren't around. I think this is a good description. You flatter when you tell someone what you think they want to hear, even

FIELD GUIDE

though you know it isn't true. Scripture has a lot to say about how corrosive flattery is. Take David, for instance, who wrote, "Everyone utters lies to his neighbor; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak. May the LORD cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts." Strong words from the shepherd turned king. So, you don't want a flatterer for a friend.

But you do want a friend who will offer you godly encouragement. This can take at least two different forms. First, godly encouragement may involve sharing with you the good things they see in you and enjoy about you. This kind of encouragement could be small in nature: "I really love your personality. You're a great time." "You are a really caring person. I am grateful I have you as a friend." "I love how disciplined you are. I want to grow to be more like that." Or it could involve bigger, more eternal matters: "I see how much you've grown in your hunger for and understanding of God's Word lately, and I praise the Lord for that." "I know you're suffering a lot right now, but I want you to know how encouraged I am by the way you've remained full of faith that God is good." "Your hospitality to people in your church is exemplary. I want to be like you in that way!" A friend who can speak an honest, encouraging word is hard to beat.

The second form that godly encouragement can take is when your friends recall God's promises back to you lest you forget them. One of my favorite passages of Scripture is 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 where Paul tells the fearful Thessalonian congregation about what they may expect at the end of the age. The passage is full of glory, focusing on Jesus' descent from the heavens, his raising the dead, and transforming the living. At the end of the section, Paul instructs the church to "encourage one another and build one another up..." Given that this is a repeat piece of instruction from 4:18, it's safe to say that the way the church was to encourage each other was to recall for one another the truths that Paul had been on about in this section of Scripture. We should do the same. Godly friends remind one another about God's words—words of promise, warning, and comfort. A good friend helps his own keep their eyes fixed on Jesus in this way.

A Loving Friend

Here is the most obvious and essential trait of a good friend—love. A good friend loves. The Bible makes this point over and over again. Again,

THE RIGHT AND WRONG WAY TO FIND GODLY FRIENDS

Solomon wrote, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Prov. 17:17). One thing you should absolutely be able to say of your good friends is that they love you. And nowhere is a friend’s love more valuable than when you’re going through something hard in your life. In fact, Solomon likens friendship to brotherhood and then says that it exists for adversity. A “brother” (friend) “is born” (exists) for seasons of suffering. What keeps a friend in their seat when you’re taking life’s left hook? Their love for you.

A friend’s love also looks like their willingness to sacrifice for your good. Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone would lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Sacrificing one’s very life for a friend may seem extreme when compared to the normal register we use to talk about friendship, but Jesus raises the point so we should sit with it.

First off, Jesus is the ultimate friend to sinners like us. He showed us his love in friendship by laying his life down for us. In doing so, he paid the penalty of sin for all those who would repent and believe in him. No friend loves like our friend Jesus. And we need no friend more than we need Jesus. If you don’t have Jesus as your friend, let me encourage you to stop right now and ask yourself this question: “What is holding me back?” Turn from your sin and trust in the Lord Jesus today. He promises in his Word that he will be a friend of God to you—that you will belong to him and that he will save you from your sins if you call on him in faith (Rom. 10:9–11). And remember, the Bible teaches that *friendship with the world is enmity with God* (James 4:4), reminding us that true friendship orients us toward Christ rather than away from Him.

This means that Jesus is not only the Savior of His people but also the model of friendship—proof that *Jesus is a friend* to sinners and that believers can truly say, “*I am a friend of God.*” His way shows us what real love, sacrifice, and loyalty look like, forming the foundation for all Proverbs on friendship and every picture of God’s friend in Scripture.

This is why the way Jesus loves His friends must shape how we love ours—not as a final conclusion, but as the framework we keep returning to as we grow in godly friendship.

FIELD GUIDE

None of us can love our friends exactly like Jesus loves us. His love knew no bounds and stopped at no measure to win us as friends. He loves us perfectly, and we can't do that. That said, a good friend should model their love after Jesus's love for us.

Now, most of us probably won't be asked to lay our lives down for our friends. Side note: You probably shouldn't lead an interview by asking someone if they'd die for you. That would just be weird. And yet, Jesus creates the category of friendship that can go as far as death itself. If sacrificial death is fair game in extreme circumstances, surely good friends should happily accept the day-to-day responsibilities that come with being a sacrificing friend.

In case those day-to-day responsibilities are unclear, let's get really specific with some concrete examples. When your basement floods at 11 PM, you want a friend who will show up with rain boots and a shop vac. When you get laid off at work, you want a friend who will make sure you and your family have gas and groceries. When you are stranded with a dead car battery, you want a friend to show up with jumper cables. When you sin and suffer as a result, you want a friend who will accompany you through that dark night and remind you of God's promise to forgive all those who trust in Jesus. When you have a miscarriage and are in grief, you want a friend who will sit with you, weep with you, and remember you and your loss. When your marriage is in trouble, you want a friend who won't judge you but will listen and offer godly counsel to help you and your spouse put it back together.

Friends show their love by sacrificing for one another in these ways and countless others. Do you have those kinds of friends? Life is hard, and you're going to need friends to help get you through. "Fair enough," you may be thinking, "but where, pray tell, do you recommend I go to find friends who would do all that for me?" We'll answer that question in the next section.

Reflection Questions:

1. Do you have any examples of a loyal, honest, loving friend in your life?
Share those with your mentor.

THE RIGHT AND WRONG WAY TO FIND GODLY FRIENDS

2. In what other ways can good friends model their care from Jesus's care for us?
3. Which of these qualities do you think is hardest to find in a friend? Which of these qualities are hardest for you to model? Why?

3

HOW TO FIND FRIENDS

Here we are at the nuts-and-bolts section of this life skill guide. You probably thought we'd never make it! How on earth do you find good (godly) friends?! I only have one ask of you as we jump into answering this question—don't assume you know what I'm talking about by simply reading my headlines. Go slow through this section and think creatively about how you might more regularly apply these principles to your life in order to find godly friends. As Jesse from *Full House* would ask, “capeesh?” Good. Here's my best shot at giving you a guide for how to gain godly friends.

1. Pray

Sounds obvious, right? But I'm serious. If you take stock of your friendships and find yourself short, you should make that a matter of prayer. I love Jesus's word to us in Matthew 7. He says in verses 7-11:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks received, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

My aforementioned sixteen-month-old son has basically three words at his disposal, and one of them is “daddy.” When I'm sitting in my reading chair and he walks over to me, he will say my name and then just stick his arms

THE RIGHT AND WRONG WAY TO FIND GODLY FRIENDS

out and start babbling. I know what he's asking me for. He wants me to pick him up so he can sit on my lap. Now, what kind of father would I be if, instead of taking him into my arms, I gave him my foot? The worst kind, that's what.

Jesus teaches us to think of God like the best kind of Father in that we can go to him and share with him our needs. God does not despise us for what we need. Instead, he provides it in spades. So, if you find yourself short on friends, ask the Lord to provide for you and trust that that is exactly what he will do.

And remember, Scripture gives us many *bible verses about friendship* that show God's heart for relationships. Turning to the *Bible on friendship* can steady your confidence that God truly cares about this area of your life.

2. Go to Church!

This is the most important point I want to make in this section, not because the others are unimportant, but because I think this point is the one most often overlooked. There is no place where you can go to find godly friends that's better than a local, gospel-preaching church. Some of the clearest *bible verses on friendship* appear in the context of God's people walking side by side, reminding us that Christian friendships grow best where God's Word is central.

Why? Four reasons.

First, gospel-preaching churches gather every Lord's Day. Come 10 AM on Sunday, you don't have to wonder where the Christians in your town are. They're likely in church! It's like fishing in a barrel with the gathering itself acting as the barrel!

The fish part of the analogy brings me to my second reason why there's no better place than the church to find godly friends. That is, gospel-preaching churches are comprised of Christians who agree about the most important things concerning the Christian faith. Sure, you can meet friends at school or work or the gym, and they might turn out to be Christians. Gospel-preaching local churches, on the other hand, are Christian by definition. That means the people in churches share your views on God,

FIELD GUIDE

the world, how to be saved, what happens when you die, how you should live, etc.

This shared foundation is exactly why the Bible's teaching on friendship flourishes in the context of the church—because believers are already united around Christ.

Okay, now for the third reason why local churches are the best place to meet and make godly friends: the church covenant. Bet you didn't see that one coming, did you? Most local churches have covenants. A covenant is an agreement made by all the members of a church concerning how everyone is going to live and follow Jesus together. Typically, each member must agree to the church covenant in order to join the church. Here is a paragraph from my church's covenant to help you get an idea:

We will walk together in brotherly love, as becomes the members of a Christian Church, exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other, and faithfully admonish and entreat one another as occasion may require.²

Remember what I said about the high walls of committed friendship? Joining a local church where there is a covenant that binds the members to one another gives every friendship within the church a head start on building those walls. I have some amazing friends in my church. In the case of each of those friendships, we started from our shared faith and our covenant with one another and every other member of our church. What a privilege!

And because those friendships grow in a place shaped by God's Word, even a single *bible verse on friendship* can carry tremendous weight as we learn how to care for one another with wisdom, patience, and grace.

Here is one last point on why a gospel preaching local church is the best place to make godly friends—in the church godly elders shepherd you. The Bible says elders are a gift to the church (Eph. 4:11-12). This is true in so many more ways than I have time to mention, so here is just one for you to chew on. Elders can help you in your pursuit of godly friendships. My elders have certainly helped me, whether by suggesting I reach out to someone to get a coffee and talk about life, by coaching me through sticky

THE RIGHT AND WRONG WAY TO FIND GODLY FRIENDS

friendship situations, or by simply praying for me to be a good friend to other church members. If you need godly friends, talk to your elders.

3. Be Vulnerable and Forward Trust.

Some of you read that subheading and thought to yourself, “I’m out.” I know, I know. Vulnerability is tough. That’s especially the case if you’ve been there, done that, and have the relational scars to prove it. Unfortunately, life in a broken world often results in brokenness even within Christian friendships. And yet, Christianity lived out requires community, and community is built on friendships characterized by, in part, vulnerability.

Although the writer of Ecclesiastes was primarily addressing the value of companionship in the workplace, his insight into relationships easily translates to the realm of friendships. He writes, “if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Eccl. 4:11-12). The basic premise is that there is strength in dependent relationships and danger in being alone. Did you catch that word dependent? Another way to say dependence in relationship is to reference vulnerability.

My wife and I didn’t have any friends when we first joined our church. Due to a significant loss in our lives, we knew we needed friends —and we needed them fast. One of the ways God graciously allowed us to build friendships was by giving us the courage to be vulnerable about our grief. People rushed to our aid, and many of our closest friendships were born.

What about you? If you’re going to make friends, you must be vulnerable about your weaknesses, your grief, your past, your hopes, and your struggles. Sure, it’s not easy, but it’s necessary. Friendships without vulnerability often remain in the realm of the superficial. By superficial, I mean you talk about work or mutual interests or family, but you don’t get to the heavy stuff—the stuff that feels like it will crush you if you don’t get some help with it.

Vulnerability with the tough stuff requires forwarding trust. By this, I mean you don’t necessarily wait for someone to prove their trustworthiness in

FIELD GUIDE

order to share what's weighing you down. Instead, you rely on your mutually agreed upon gospel convictions and covenant, and you assume the best of the person you're being vulnerable with. Assuming the best is very counter-cultural. It's also very Christian. So forward trust, assume the best, and be vulnerable with your new friends in your local church. Ask them to pray for you in whatever you're struggling with. Invite them to challenge you in your sinful temptations. Let them carry your burdens and sorrows.

4. Go First

I've heard many Christians say that the Bible condemns loving yourself. I hate to be a myth-buster, but this simply is not true. What is true is that the Bible condemns loving yourself most. But nowhere does the Bible teach that man is to have zero regard for himself. In fact, Jesus seems to say the opposite when he delivers the second greatest command: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). How should you love your neighbor? Like you love you.

What this means for friendship is that you go first in loving others like you love yourself, and want others to love you. You be the friend you hope to have. The alternative, of course, is to sit and wait for someone to come along and really impress you with their care, and then and only then show them kindness and love in return. This strategy is not to be pursued for at least a few reasons. First, your care for others should be modeled after Jesus's care for you. He didn't ask you to serve him first. Rather, he came to serve you and give his life as a ransom for your soul's sake (Matt. 20:28).

Second, giving only when getting isn't kind to the other person. Only giving when you get calls into question what motivated you to give in the first place. Instead, Scripture calls us to "Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom. 12:10).

The last reason you should not wait to receive friendship before you show it is purely pragmatic, but still valid—waiting will slow you down. Ever hear the phrase, "the early bird gets the worm?" I think the same principle applies to friendships. The ones who have friends are often the ones who went first to be the kind of friend they hoped to gain.

THE RIGHT AND WRONG WAY TO FIND GODLY FRIENDS

Here are some practical ways you might think about going first in friendship.

- Go up to someone after church one Sunday and ask them at least three curious questions about them. These questions could range from how long they've been in the church to where they work to how they were converted.
- Okay, so now you know someone's name and three interesting things about them. Ask them if they want to come over to your house for a meal or meet you for coffee sometime. Go first in getting a one-on-one meeting scheduled.
- Let's say you've now got the beginnings of a new friendship cooking, and you find out the other person has a significant need of some kind (e.g., chronic pain, a super busy schedule, an unruly amount of housework to do). Ask yourself the question, "Is there anything I can do to serve my new friend at their point of need?" Once you arrive at a conclusion to that question, get busy! There's no time like the present.
- Try to remember what your friends share with you about their lives. Remember birthdays, favorite foods or places to go, important anniversaries, etc. Send a text or a card to say that you remember this or that and that you're thinking of them.

There are countless ways to outdo someone in showing honor and countless ways to go first in friendship. The point is to be the kind of friend you hope to gain.

Reflection Questions:

1. Why is the church a great place to find friends?
2. What do you think about the challenge of being vulnerable with others?
3. Do you struggle to assume the best of others? Why or why not?
4. What are practical ways that you can go first in loving your friends?

4

DON'T FEAR YOUR FRIENDS

This section may seem random given that this guide is all about gaining godly friendships, but trust me, this is one of the most important things I can encourage you with on the topic. If you picked up this guide hoping to gain friends, especially if you don't have many right now, please pay close attention. Friends can't fix you. Whatever is broken in your life, however you are currently struggling, or whatever loneliness you're experiencing, friends cannot ultimately fix you. Sure, they can help. In fact, they can be a deeply encouraging feature in life—especially a life ridden with difficulty. They can be ministers of God to you, but they can't be your god. Therefore, you must resist the temptation to make your friends idols to whom you worship and fear.

Only Fear God

Solomon writes to his sons, “The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe” (Prov. 29:25). A snare is a contraption that is laid in the woods under ground cover to catch an unassuming animal by the foot as it passes by. The analogy indicates that the fear of man is subtle. Unlike other sins, which show themselves more outrightly, the fear of man is not always obvious to us. In fact, I would argue that the fear of man ruins way more friendships than anyone realizes. Few see it coming or know what happened after the fact.

Your ultimate affection and trust are not meant to be set on your friends. Instead, you should trust the LORD. Why? Because Solomon says he is safe. All that brokenness and hurt you carry, all those sins that entangle, all the loneliness that you feel. Friends can help, but only God can heal.

THE RIGHT AND WRONG WAY TO FIND GODLY FRIENDS

Friends can serve, but only God can save. Friends can encourage, but only God can bring an end to your trouble.

Friendships are safer when you fear and trust in God rather than in man, not accepting you, or loving you, or caring for you, or completing you. Don't fear man. Trust God.

You Can't Love Those Who You Fear

I recently had a bout with the fear of man—specifically with the fear of not being accepted or respected. This is a reoccurring challenge and a besetting sin for me. I reached out to a friend and counselor, and he said what I already knew, but found so helpful in the moment: "You can't love people if you fear them. If you fear them, you'll only be able to manipulate them for your own gain." How true my brother's wisdom is.

Here's how the math works out. If you fear not receiving something from your friends, you will inevitably spend your time and energy trying to get from them rather than giving to them. Even words and actions that look like service will be done in the name of receiving something in return for yourself. What do we call an action that is done in order to evoke a specific response for personal gain? We call that manipulation. When you fear your friends, you'll manipulate them in order to get what you think you need from them.

But when you fear only God, you're free to love and serve your friends, knowing that your ultimate gain is in Christ, not in man. If you struggle with the fear of man, you may consider being vulnerable with your friends and confessing it to them. Say something like, "Hey brother (or sister), I need to confess that lately I have been fearing what you think of me more than what God thinks. My words and actions toward you have been mostly born out of self-interest, and as a result, I have failed to serve you out of a love for God and you. Please forgive me for this and pray that God will help me overcome this fear for the sake of his glory and for the sake of our friendship." A confession like this may be what you need to start to fear man less, so that you may love them more.

The fear of man is toxic to your friendships, but you (and your friendships) are safe when you fear God and love others. So, as you work to apply the

FIELD GUIDE

principles of this guide for the purpose of gaining friends, just keep the goodness of friendships in perspective. They are worth a lot, but they aren't ultimate. Only God can be everything for you.

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you ever feared your friends? How did that play out?
2. Why should we only fear God?
3. What does fearing man have to do with loving and serving them?
4. What kinds of ways might we inappropriately fear our friends?



CONCLUSION

Remember my elementary school friend, Neil? I still think about him sometimes. Here's what I didn't tell you from the jump—he was probably right not to want to be my friend anymore. The reality is that I wasn't a very good friend to him. I didn't seek to love and serve him. Instead, I feared what he thought of me. As a result, I created drama in our friendship that eventually proved too much for him, and he signed off. I was a bad friend.

By God's grace, I've grown a lot since my elementary school days. I am still an imperfect (and sometimes bad) friend. But I aspire to be a better one by applying the same principles I've shared with you in this life skills guide. Learning *how to be a better friend* has become a lifelong pursuit for me, and I pray that not only would I grow to be a better friend, but you would also. I also pray that the Lord will richly provide you with many godly friendships to encourage you along your way, and that He would continue to shape us into the friends He desires us to be.



END NOTES

1. This may seem like a contradiction, but it is important to note that there are rare exceptions when you may not be able to be a loyal friend because loyalty would put you or your friend in danger of some kind. While loyalty is a value we should hold to, it isn't the *only* value. To know whether or not your loyalty to someone else has reached its end, seek counsel from one of your pastors or a trustworthy mentor.
2. <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/about-us/what-we-believe/church-covenant/>



Taylor Hartley serves as the editorial director at 9Marks in Washington, D.C. He is married to his wife, Rachel, and together they have one son, Bode. Taylor earned his M.Div. from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and is currently working on his Th.M. at London Seminary in the UK.

