

Fidelity In Friendship

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

*“Always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.” |
Thessalonians 5:15, ESV*

Fidelity.

It's a word perhaps more likely to be used in the context of its absence rather than its presence. Regrettably, it often comes to our attention through its lack; *infidelity*.

While we tend to think of fidelity as describing physical faithfulness in committed, intimate relationships, it's not just restricted to these.

The word fidelity is also used to describe employee loyalty to a company, accuracy of scientific modeling and simulation, and, in audio, how accurately, a copy reproduces its source (the term 'hi-fi', a shortened version of 'High Fidelity' refers to the high-quality reproduction of sound from its original source).

Derived from the Latin word *fidēlis*, fidelity is the quality of being faithful, loyal, accurate, or true. And it's a quality essential to all authentic, interpersonal relationships.

Faithfulness + Loyalty

In a consumer-driven and highly narcissistic society, fidelity is a fast-disappearing commodity. Those who espouse fidelity as some kind of virtue, particularly in relation to marriage, are considered by many to be childish and somewhat naïve. Increasingly, we're being told that more important than your word, promise, or loyalty to someone else, is *doing what's*

*best for you**.

Like those who once believed the universe revolved around the earth, [this generation is perhaps the most faithless of its time](#); producing friendships that are largely built on utility or pleasure, by those who believe that all else is subordinate to their own interests or needs.

Unlike the philosophers of old, who wrote copiously about the importance of friendship, it seems that while we certainly still place a premium of sorts on friendship, it no longer carries the same significance to us today as it did for the ancients.

Much has been written about fidelity in marriage; but what about fidelity in friendship?

More Than Utility Or Pleasure

Friendships built on either utility or pleasure aren't innately wrong in and of themselves. But they are both transient and short-lived, simply because one's needs and pleasures are apt to change over time. Fidelity doesn't really form part of the dynamic. Loyalty isn't really a requirement in a relationship that is largely transactional. If needs or pleasure are no longer being met, one simply moves on to another source or supply, with no sense of guilt or attachment.

Yet, as humans, and particularly as Christians, we're encouraged to go deeper in our friendships. Our relationships are intended to be built on something far more permanent and meaningful than simply passing transactions of utility or pleasure.

The Bible offers life-changing wisdom on how we're to approach friendships and what a friendship of fidelity, built in a culture of goodness, looks like.

A Culture Of Goodness

One of the first things we're told about the creation of the world in which we live is that it was *good*. Translated from the Hebrew word *tov* (טוב), the constant use of the word *good* throughout Genesis 1 connects the flourishing and harmonious creation that springs to life with God's own life (Genesis 1:1-31). All the goodness that exists flows from God Himself and is infused throughout this new creation; its goodness is simply an extension of Him.

Humanity, created for the purpose of imaging God's goodness, is included in this summary of *good*. From Genesis, we discover that all that is around us and, indeed, in us is intended to be God-shaped and God-filled; a culture of goodness.

We know, of course, this goodness did not last.

Disobedience...shame...mortality; the evil of sin entered God's good world, and would eventually spread across the surface of the earth. From the world that existed then, [a perfect Eden](#) where God's glory shone softly between the tall, slim trees and [Heaven and Earth were as one](#), to now, is a long and sorry tale.

But even in the dark, God has been busy making all things new. His story of reconciliation and redemption finally find light and life and goodness in [Jesus Christ](#).

We, [the church](#), as the body of Christ, are created anew, now empowered to flourish in the purpose for which God intended; celebrating and demonstrating a culture of goodness.

Just as in the first creation narrative, so it is in the second. God becomes the dynamic and life-giving goodness that permeates the culture of the church and our relationships; both those with the household of faith and those [with our unbelieving neighbours and friends](#). These relationships are built on something lasting and valuable; the innate goodness

of God.

“Bad people can be friends for reasons of pleasure or utility, but only good people can be friends for each other’s sake.” | Aristotle

What Does Fidelity In Friendship Look Like?

Centered and rooted in the goodness of God, fidelity is a crucial element to friendships built in a culture of goodness.

Firstly, fidelity in friendship means we’ll be people who are *reliable in our friendships* and that our friends are *people who can be relied upon*. We trust and know that their word is good and that they’re faithful, and they’re assured of the same from us in return. (Proverbs 18:24, Proverbs 12:26).

Unsurprisingly, faithfulness is more likely to be tested in times of adversity than joy but Proverbs 17:17 assures us that true friends will be found in times of trouble too. The parable of the Prodigal son is a lesson in the disappointment of friendships built on the lesser, more transient ground of utility or pleasure, friendships which soon disappear when the transactional nature of the relationship runs its course (Luke 15:11-32).

Secondly, fidelity in friendship *quenches the evil of gossip and slander*. It’s impossible for fresh water and saltwater to flow from the same spring. Likewise, it’s impossible for us to praise our Lord and Father in one breath, and then curse our friends with another (James 3:1-12). This kind of dynamic in friendship isn’t life-giving, but life-destroying, akin to lighting a forest fire from a single, seemingly insignificant spark. Small but catastrophic, gossip and slander will poison any friendship (James 4:11, Proverbs 16:28). However, a commitment to fidelity in friendship will prevent the ruin

that gossip or slander inevitably brings.

Thirdly, fidelity in friendship *models the sacrificial love shown by Jesus*. This will show itself in not just words but action; desiring our friends' good and acting to bring it about, advocating on their behalf (Job 16:20-21), showing compassion (Galatians 6:2), exercising humility in our interactions with each other (Philippians 2:3), resolving to choose patience and kindness (Proverbs 22:24-25), and being willing to offer forgiveness when asked, or, conversely, accept forgiveness when it's offered (Colossians 3:12-14).

Does fidelity in friendship require us to overlook sin? Not at all. But a friendship built in a culture of goodness will also acknowledge that we exist in a still-fallen and yet to be completely redeemed world and, because of this, *we will fail and be failed* during this lifetime.

Perhaps this is where fidelity finds its greatest test; do we think good, speak good, and want good for our friends, despite the reality that they can and will let us down? Do we feel the goodwill of our friends towards us? Do we know, deep within our hearts, that they too think good of us, speak good of us to others, and actively want good for us, despite the reality that we will sometimes fail them?

"The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing...not healing, not curing...that is a friend who cares." | Henri Nouwen

"Wishing to be friends is quick work, but friendship is a slow ripening fruit." | Aristotle

What fidelity in friendship ultimately looks like is this: a tree on a lonely hill, and a beloved Son giving his life that we might have life, and have it more abundantly. What we learn

from Jesus' example of faithfulness and fidelity is that *greater love has no man than to give his life for his friends.*

Fidelity In A Fallen World

It's important to acknowledge that while we may desire to build flourishing friendships of fidelity, we're still creatures of the earth, living in a fallen world. Paul, the Apostle comments in Romans 7:19, "*For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.*"

While this doesn't mean we should give up on our pursuit of fidelity in friendship, we should perhaps *expect the best, plan for the worst, and prepare to be surprised* (Denis Waitley).

Expecting the best is, I think, defined in this context as what we're responsible to bring to any prospective relationship. More than just a requirement for utility or pleasure, we must be ready to contribute to building our friendships in a culture of goodness. Are we personally prepared to offer steadfast loyalty, demonstrate a pursuit of truth, and show a commitment to discretion and faithfulness?

Christian discipleship is a process that moves us from being spiritually and emotionally immature children to be fully mature and developed adults – "*people dedicated to God, and capable and equipped for every good work.*" (2 Timothy 3:17).

This process of discipleship is a principle-centered, character-based, "inside out" approach to [developing our authentic self in Christ](#). It means to start first with ourselves; even more fundamentally, to start with the most inside part of self – our core – and to honestly analyse our paradigms, our character, and our motives. We cannot expect a culture of goodness to flourish in our relationships if we're ill-equipped ourselves to contribute to that.

Planning for the worst is, I think, the reality that both ourselves and those with whom we wish to grow in friendship will make mistakes, will fail each other, and will cause pain and disappointment. Indeed, all of creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it (Romans 8:19-23). Until [that perfect day](#), we can and will continue to fail.

Do we acknowledge these flaws exist in ourselves and others? Do we choose to love, despite these failures? Have we planned and prepared for the time where we may need to offer forgiveness, patience, gentleness, and kindness to those who have disappointed us? Or the time when we too must plead forgiveness and pursue reconciliation with those whom we have failed? And let's not overlook the fact that it was at the time that we were still enemies of God that He most proved His love for us by sending His Son (Romans 5:8).

And prepare to be surprised! Prepare to be surprised at what the love of God, which has been shone into our hearts through His Son, Jesus Christ, is able to accomplish! In Jesus, we are free to set down doubt, judgment, rejection, loss. We're free to take up the crown of the kingdom, and our identity as a much-beloved son or daughter. From this position of knowing and being known, and deeply loved as a child of God, we're free to live in a life of love, and His grace will give us capacity and strength far beyond what is humanly possible.

"God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we're free of worry on Judgment Day – our standing in the world is identical with Christ's. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life – fear of death, fear of judgment – is one not yet fully formed in love. We, though, are going to love – love and be loved. First, we were loved, now we love." | 1 John 4:17-21, MSG

***This article should not be interpreted as critical or not in support of the need for self-care, the reality of a requirement for appropriate establishment of boundaries within relationships, or the necessity of recognising, naming, and leaving toxic relationships. I would argue that these are also aspects of championing a culture of goodness. *Doing what's best for you* is sometimes a valid and necessary step in growing this culture in your own life on the basis that God is the foundation for living. "If we don't have a sense of the primacy of God, we will never get it right. Not God at the margins, not God as an option, not God on the weekends. God at center and circumference; God first and last; God, God, God."**
| Eugene Peterson

This article was first published 16 August 2021