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## Friending

### Part 1 – Choosing Reliable Friends

Pastor Ted Cunningham

The thing about the church that I love, that I can never leave... I can't walk away from the family of God because we mourn with those who mourn and we rejoice with those who rejoice. I think that's every single Sunday and every single week. Every time we gather, there is someone in here that's rejoicing and there's someone in here who is mourning. As the family, we gather and we do that with each other and encourage one another.

Don Bevins served on our security team. We're talking today about choosing reliable friends and this church has never had a more reliable friend than Denise Bevins. What people often forget is that Don did not like the spotlight. He sat back there... Don was a tall guy, retired California Highway Patrol. He loved being on the security team. Nothing that could possibly happen here scared him at all. He was ready for action. We had a joke for the last 13 years.

He would say, "Man, you really, really pick on us old people."

I'd say, "I don't mean to, Don."

He'd be like, "Yeah, it's like we're going to be gone tomorrow."

Then, the last couple of years, it became that whenever I would go up to him and go, "Hey, Don" He'd go, "I'm still here." It was almost like he was here to prove a point. I love that man, love that family. We surround Denise and her children and grandchildren today as well as Linda and her family. It's a time of mourning.

I got the news this morning and I told Amy... I was studying like I do on Sunday morning. I said, "Boy, let's just get rid of these notes and invite people up to talk. That could get really bad."

As part of our worship, we take an offering in these baskets here at Woodland Hills. As they come around, we encourage your generosity. We say thank you for giving. Just to share with you, I think it's the fifth year, but I would need Denise to verify that. I don't really have any facts or details straight this morning, but I think it's the fifth year that you, as a church family, have given \$42,000.00 to Care for Kids. We just sent that check off again this week to meet the physical needs of students in Stone and Taney Counties. That money is distributed, along with other funds, into 14 school districts across Stone and Taney Counties to meet needs throughout the school year. Again, it's your generosity that makes all of that possible, so we are very grateful.

As the offering baskets are coming around, we are going to pray and I just thought if there is anybody here or over at the chapel... if you need prayer for your family, if you're not at the rejoicing point, you're at the mourning point, whatever that may be, I'm going to invite you to stand so your church family can pray over you as I lead us in a time of prayer. I know there are many families in our church that this would be them, so if you would stand and let's pray together.

Father, for those who are standing right now, I pray that they would feel clearly today from this church family that we mourn with them. We understand all the emotions that come with mourning. There can be relief when it's been a battle and then you can move quickly to regret that you feel the relief and sadness and loss and for some... Speaking to some this morning who have been experiencing mourning for a very long period of time – some within those who are up here leading us in worship this morning – I just ask, as the Comforter, that you comfort those who are standing. I pray that they would understand today that yes, they know what they believe, but sometimes those feelings don't catch up to the beliefs, but today they would rest in you, knowing that you are the source of life. You're the Creator and the Sustainer of it.

I ask for blessings over their family and that they will allow people to help them and encourage them. For a lot of us, as church family, this is a time that we just need the ministry of presence, just us being there. We don't need to say a whole lot, we don't need to explain things away right now. There are some in deep mourning who just need the handshake, the hug, the pat on the shoulder, the holding of the hand, whatever it may be. I pray that this body ministers to those who are standing at this point, here and at the chapel and those who are online as well.

We thank you for this, Lord. And it's in the name of Jesus that everyone agreed and said... Amen.

Part of our church, if you're new to our church... We are an elder led church. What that means is we are not a pastor led church. There are times people think I call the shots and when I'm not here, they wonder who's... I don't want to be in charge. Let me just repeat that again as loud as I can. I don't want to be in charge because you people exhaust me. No, you know I love you. I use humor to medicate, so, again, you've figured that out. By the way, I've asked the Lord to allow me to stay planted at one church for a lifetime and the day you hear that Ted Cunningham has passed away, you can rest assured my funeral will be somewhere on the strip in two showings: 3:00 and 8:00. For those who like matinees or those who like evening shows... But, I want it to be a celebration as I know Don wants a celebration. I know Linda wants a celebration for Bill.

Part of being an elder led church means we are not committee led, so we don't gather committees when things need to get done and say, "Okay, you guys are in charge of..." Or, sometimes committees become decision makers for things other people need to do. We don't have committees. We're not a congregationally led church. We don't all gather to do meetings where everybody has a vote. We don't run that way. We're an elder led church and we believe this is consistent with what the scripture teaches.

We've had a healthy elder body for so long, but we've lost several elders. Gary Smalley moved away and then passed away last year. Jim Sedlacek and Bill Rogers, both elders into their 70s that were almost like fulltime staff... They were here all the time, ministering to the needs of this congregation.

Bill is in Springfield now, dealing with health issues, so he's near family. Jim moved to Phoenix to be near family. Dr. Hayter left Branson and moved to Springfield to be with Sonya's parents who are needing help. As we've all said, as we add to the elder board, how it works at our church is we don't go looking for elders; we ask the Lord to bring them to our attention. It really happens throughout the congregation. You just see it. People bring names to us and they bring folks to us and say, "Hey, I've noticed spiritual leadership in this gentleman; I need you to consider him."

According to our bylaws, that name is brought to us and then we pray over it as elders and then we bring to you a new elder, which is what we are doing this morning. According to the bylaws, you have two weeks to inspect his character. I love this part. We've never changed this in the bylaws; I don't think there is a need to. But it's two weeks, so in case there is something we didn't know about him like you come to us and go, "Hey, I served time with him and I don't think all the charge were dropped yet."

We can joke about this, but can I just tell you that as far as elders are concerned, serving time is not a disqualification for being an elder. Do you know how many of the apostles served time? I'm just throwing that out there. That's a whole other message for another time. I'm just saying someone can have a rough past. Don't look at that like "Boy, do you know what they did when they were twenty?" Yeah, but now look at what Jesus has done in this man's life. So, it's not that type of inspection. "I went to high school with that guy; he was the biggest meth user I've ever known." Okay, but now... Now I get to introduce you to the guy and you're thinking *who have they got coming up there?* It's a leader.

Today, we are presenting Jerod Hill as an elder of Woodland Hills Family Church. I'm going to invite Jerod forward and his wife Carolyn. You'll recognize Carolyn. She leads worship here at Woodland Hills and their sons Connor and Dylan. Step right up here guys. We've been sharing with this family for a few weeks now, saying, "Hey, you're always brought to us as someone for leadership in the church." We approached Jerod to consider it and to pray about this role, knowing he's an overseer of the church and if we don't hear anything in two weeks... It is kind of humorous that we have that in bylaws, but I understand the intent.

You heard Carolyn's story a few weeks ago and how the Lord has used them. That's what we're looking at. We're looking at their marriage, we're looking at their family. They are already leading. They are already guiding and helping and doing the work, so we just said, "Jerod, if we could bring you before the congregation and ask you to join our elder board to bring guidance and leadership to this church..." Just so you know how our elders work, it's not a... We take minutes and file them like you're supposed to for all of that, but we don't have like "Well, it was voted on five to four, so we're..." That's not how an elder board works. One elder can say, "I feel from the Lord that we're not supposed to..." and we'll all stop and wait. We'll all stop and seek discernment because the Lord can speak to him something that I haven't heard. So, this is what we're bringing before you and ask that you pray for this family because we know that when someone takes the role of leadership, the target on their back grows larger. The target on their back and the target on their family.

I'm going to ask that you stand again, as we pray over them as a church family. Father, we come to you thinking and knowing that we have heard clearly from you on this. We believe that not only is Jerod qualified, but we believe he is called to this role and to this task. As he takes on the leadership of overseer of this church, I pray for his marriage, I pray for his family that he would prioritize his wife and his children and lead his home well. That he would lead here so that his leadership to the congregation would reflect what he's already doing at home.

I ask that you cover them in the blood of Jesus and protect them from evil and fulfill your purpose in their lives that they would know this calling comes with a price, this calling comes with understanding the responsibility that is being laid upon them. I ask that as they walk through this town, as they minister around this community, that you bring those across their path as they encourage, as they confront, as Jerod helps sheep in thickets, that you would give him discernment and wisdom and grace and strength and truth to go with him.

We pray all of this in the name Jesus, and everyone agreed and said... Amen.

So, we're nowhere even close to being on schedule with what we're supposed to be doing today and we're very much okay with that. We're starting a new series called *Friending* and we're talking about friendship the next three weeks. We're then, after this series, launching into a seven-week series in August and September called *The Creed*. We're going to use the Apostles Creed as an outline to teach doctrine.

We all kind of felt led to this. This is another one of those things that kind of bubbled up when, in April, we taught on the Lord's Supper and we just made the key points of what the Lord's Supper is and how it's administered. We walked through that and then we participated in the Lord's Supper together.

We did the same thing last month, in June, where we did the same thing for baptism. In June, we celebrated 91 people at Woodland Hills Family Church baptized, most of them spontaneous. All the questions we get asked and sometimes just in conversation hearing people talk and speak of the Lord and speak of the Trinity and speak of the Holy Spirit and speak of the church and speak of the forgiveness of sins, we said. "Let's just do the same thing with every major doctrine. Let's just walk through it like we did with the Lord's Supper and like we did with baptism, the two ordinances of the church," so that's what we are going to start as we head into school.

This series was for the point of getting all of our young people ready for school that they would understand what true friendship is. Today, we are talking about choosing reliable friends. In 1 John 4, we read **15 If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. 16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.**

Here's one of the biggest mistakes I hear a lot of Christians making. "Jesus is my source of salvation. I trusted him, I placed faith alone in Christ alone, I remember where I was, I repented of my sins, I became a Christian. Jesus saved me, now the rest of my life is on me." No, Jesus is not only the source of your

salvation, he is the source of your life. He didn't accomplish this in your life for you now to go and it's all on you.

The gospel brought you to salvation and the gospel sustains you through life. The gospel of Jesus dead, buried, and resurrected. This is your life. We just said it. We believe Jesus breathes life into dead people. We believe the same resurrection power, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is the same power available for you today. Paul declares that in Ephesians. So, we rely on Jesus, the Son of God, and the love God has for us through his Son Jesus.

1 John 4 goes on to say **God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.** We love because he first loved us. We're able to pour into other people, we're able to give to other people because we know who the true and only source is.

I've used the love jug illustration for years around here and some of you are like, "Not again! You've got to be kidding me!" My kids say the exact same thing because I use this at home all the time when I feel the blame game coming into the home. But, this is my heart and I am to be connected to the true and only source of life because I'm going to go out the rest of the week and pour into other people. I want to know they're getting the overflow. Jesus is my source and relationships are the overflow. Sometimes we get that confused and we think, *I so love this girl. She's everything to me. She completes me. If I don't have her, I won't have anything.* No, no, no; your marriage is an overflow of the source of life. Your family is an overflow... You're work... Scripture says to do you work as unto the Lord. Your work is an overflow of your life. Your friendships are an overflow of your life.

I want to add to this illustration. You've seen it before. I'm not giving you the full blown, thirty-minute illustration. We're going to go shorter with this so we can get to the main point for the morning as we launch this series. So, I want to be as full of God's love as possible. I don't want to leave the home at empty or at a quarter tank; I want to be as full of God's love as possible.

Corynn and I had a little rental car we drove from Denver. We had an event in Oberlin, Kansas. If you've ever been there... Okay, so, I spoke at the 2017 Kansas Beef Summit. It was awesome! I have to tell you, I learned a lot. I've been eating hamburgers every day since.

We drove across I-70. Let me tell you, in Kansas, they don't have restaurants. I couldn't find a place to eat. We were running out of gas. You know how you have the dots on your fuel tank? I was getting like 35 miles to the gallon in this little clown car I rented from Denver and I'm now going to drive home. The dots kept going down and going down. I'm in Kansas and there's nothing. Let me say it, nobody lives in Kansas! Why Dorothy wants to go back there, I have no idea. There ain't nothing there.

I go, "Corynn, we're getting on empty here and I've got to get to a gas station." Then on the last two ticks I'm like, "Oh boy, Corynn, this is not good." Then the last tick, "Oh, we're down to one." And I don't even see an "up ahead" sign. They don't have billboards telling you something's coming because there ain't nothing coming. Then the last tick went away. We're technically out of fuel. We have only what's left in the line and in the engine.

I said, "I think we should pray." We turn off the motor and I'm conserving energy. I was doing 85, so I dropped down to 75 because there's no police in Kansas either; you can really do whatever you want. But, I knew Topeka was up ahead. "Just get me to dang Topeka." Finally, it said "eight and a half miles next exit" and it showed a little gas symbol, but we have no gas and I'm panicking. Have you ever been there?

I'm convinced we're there all the time in our relationships. Somebody wants to talk to you and you snap back. The phone rings and you're like "Who's that!" Let me tell you it's not the person calling you or the phone ringing that's the issue; it's the fact that you're on empty and you're stressed.

The source of life... God is love. Whoever lives in love, lives in God and God in them. So, we know and rely on this love.

Now these glasses represent the people in my life. This usually takes me twenty to thirty minutes to do; I'm going to have to do it quickly. This first glass (wine glass) represents my wife. I grew up independent, fundamental, pre-millennial, King James Version only Baptist. This is not an approved glass, I can tell you that. I had to call my mom and borrow it this morning for this illustration.

I said, "Mom, I just need one; don't need all your stemware. Don't want to leave you hanging." No, the Baptist hate the wine jokes.

But, I want to pour into Amy, so I pour into Amy. And then we had our daughter a few years ago and I love pouring... We had it easy. Corynn is an easy first-born child. How many of you had an easy first-born child? How many of you took credit for that first-born child? How did God fix that in you? Second child. He gave you a demon possessed child, born in iniquity. This is my wife and kids and I'm half gone. How many can relate to that? I'm almost half gone.

Here's my parents who live two streets over. We live on Tranquil and they live on Peaceful... anyway. My dad retired 17 years ago and he's watched Fox News 24 hours a day, seven days a week. When I go over to see him, I'm like, "Hey, Dad, how's it going?" and he's like, "Well, we're going to hell in a handbasket!" But, that's not true. Honestly, I made him raise his hand in the first service. He barely watches Fox News anymore.

I go, "You keep watching that twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, let me give you the sound it's making in your life. It's sucking the life out of you. It's killing you slowly." Stop watching Fox News, Martha. Sorry, I just had to throw that... I looked over there in case you were thinking I was talking about somebody else. I'm talking about you. I want you to live a long and healthy retirement, okay?

But, I love pouring into my mom. She wants me connected to the family. That's my parents and look, I'm down to this. This little shot glass here represents my mother-in-law. Is Linda here? Stand up, Linda. I want the whole church to meet you. That's my mother-in-law and let me tell you something. Denny, you better stop laughing. She wants you to know that's a punch line. That's a joke. She's a party on wheels; you need to know that about my mother-in-law.

Then I come to the church office and you all suck the life right out of me. I'm down to very little left. I love using this illustration with my kids. Every time I pull this out from underneath the sink or I even do it at restaurants. I'll grab it off a bus station. If we're blaming each other and going at each other, I pull this off and the kids are like, "NO!"

When Carson was young and I started this, he said, "Would you please give us a spanking instead? We hate the love jug illustration." "No, the love jug is here forever. Your kids are going to learn it and my great grandkids."

Co-dependency is sitting around with an empty love jug, an empty heart, waiting for all the people you've poured into to pour back into you. Here's where we're adding to the illustration today. I believe the mistake we make...

This is Facebook (an entire table of cups and glasses). I don't bash social media. But, we want this series to put Facebook back in its rightful place. Everybody resonates with that because here's the sadness for me. You don't have anything left because you've been pouring into your most precious relationships. To me this is the sadness. As you go with Facebook... and we're stilling calling them "friends." I think we need a new term because I think we're redefining friendship. We feel like going on social media and "I'm going to give that a person a little and I'm going to give this person a little" and you're thinking you're not really giving them anything. Have you ever read something on Facebook that made you mad? Yeah, you're pouring in. Some of you aren't even on Facebook, but your spouse reads for you what they're reading on Facebook. You're like "I've tried to stay off of it for my emotional, physical, and mental wellbeing and then my spouse reads something to me and says, 'Doesn't that make you mad?'"

The problem is we're pouring too much into this right here and you can't. You just can't do it. I come in here sometimes on Sunday and someone will go, "Did you see what I did this week?" and I'm like "What?" "Well, I went to..." "Yeah, I didn't see that." "You're not looking on Facebook?" "Well, let's just put this back into perspective a little bit. I've got 5,000 'friends' on Facebook and I don't sit there scrolling through your life because I've got one of my own." I'm not uncaring; you just can't care for each one. This is what's making our brain...

Young people, your brains is actually changing because you weren't built by Almighty God to process so much information and so much different information in such short period of time. You can't get a death announcement and then move into a sports highlight and then move into a college friend saying something and just processing... I mean it's just your emotions going everywhere. That's not how it was meant to work. When someone passed away, you would do what Denise did when she picked up the phone and called me at 5:30. That's relationships, that's friendship. Instead of meeting with someone and asking if they saw on Facebook what you did, just tell them what you did.

If I can just help my senior friends out on social media. You get frustrated because people aren't seeing your stuff. Facebook is determining what people see and what they don't see. If you want to pay a little extra, they'll bump up your post, if that's important to you. I heard one comedian this week say, "My wife got mad at me for not liking her pictures." And he said, "I was in the pictures. When you took the picture, I said, 'Hey, I like that picture.' How much more invested can I be in the pictures?"

I think what's happening is we're starting to call this friendship. This is acquaintances, people you know, but it just needs to go back in its rightful place. Maybe a little less time on it. You let the Lord speak to you on however this illustration goes out, but I'm thinking this is too much.

And we know our need for companionship. We read this in Ecclesiastes 4. I love this text. **9 Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor...** Two people working together is more productive than just one on their own. Friendships and companionship makes us more productive. **10 If either of them falls down, one can help the other up.** Not only is it productive; it's protective. You have people who can come and help you when you're going through a difficult time.

I think we're seeking too much validation from Facebook when really you only need it from a few close people, reliable friends. You post something you're going through because you want to hear it and you want to see it, but a lot of people are speaking into it. Again, this series isn't about being unfriendly, uncaring, unloving, unkind. That's not at all what we're talking about. We're talking about investing more. ***But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. 11 Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.*** If I can just tell the teenagers in the room not to misinterpret this verse. It's not speaking of that. ***But how can one keep warm alone? 12 Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.***

Do you remember that Ronald Regan joke about the two guys getting chased by a bear. I love that joke. I'm always reminded of that with Ecclesiastes 4: 12 because in the middle of these two friends running away from a bear, the one guy stops and starts tying his shoe. The other friend says, "What are you doing? We have to outrun this bear!" The first friend says, "No, I just have to outrun you. Let him snack on you for a bit. I'm getting away from you."

Here's what the scripture teaches about our friendships. **The quality of your friendships is more important than the number of your friendships.** If you're seeking validation online or you're feeling down and low and you're going to a list of people you haven't been able to confirm as friends yet, you need to rethink that.

The scripture says this in Proverbs 12: **26 The righteous choose their friends carefully, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.** Here's what's true about every single one of us in this room... every single one of us; it doesn't matter what your personality is. If you're more introverted and this is like your favorite message you've ever heard... "A few people, that's all we want." Or you're extroverted and you want a bunch of friends. Listen, it's true of all of us in here; every single person in here has **limited time and energy.**

So, where we're headed in this series... Next week, we're going to look at how to be a friend of sinners, but not the world. Then in the third part of this series, we're going to talk about what it means to work through conflict with friends. **Invest more in fewer.**

This is kind of where we are going to leave it this morning. As we look at Proverbs, I'm going to share one passage from two different translations. When you first read them, you're thinking they're saying two different things, but they are saying the same thing.



In the New American Standard, we read Proverbs 18: 24 this way: ***A man of too many friends comes to ruin...*** It's a great study sometimes when you're reading through proverbs. Just circle the word *too* every time you see it. Too much. Seldom set foot in your neighbor's house. Too much of you and they will hate you. You're a loving, kind, and caring person, but sometimes you're just too much. ***But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.***

In the New International Version, we get the same idea, but it looks different. ***One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin...*** Yeah, because when I fall down, who's there to pick me up. Am I counting on all these people. Am I counting on the quantity or do I have those I know who will drop everything and be there by my side? ***...but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.***

Jim Rohn puts it this way: *"You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with."*

So, where we're going... Again, kind of the morning was meant to go in a different direction when we planned all of this, but it kind of turned more into an introduction. Here's the big idea we're leaving with today: **Invite close friends to speak into your life and don't spend too much time fretting over unsolicited advice, opinions, or comments of "friends."**

When you're struggling, when you're frustrated, when you're down... I know the millennials in the room are going "Does this old pastor not know we ain't on Facebook anymore?" It can be Snapchat, it can be texting, it can be anything. I've been with some young people and the amount of texts they get in an hour... And from all sorts of different people. You'd begin honing in and thinking through who is it that you're going to allow to speak into your life.

Proverbs 27: 6 puts it this way: ***Wounds from a friend can be trusted...*** You want someone you can trust speaking into your life. ***...but an enemy multiplies kisses.***

I'll leave you with this quote from Charles Stanley that heard 20 years ago and it's never left me. He says this: *"A friend accepts you for who you are, but loves you too much to see you stay that way."*

If the only friends in your life are people who are validating you and hitting the like button on your comments, your pictures, and your life, you need to start looking for more reliable friends. And for some, when we're going through a difficult time and when life hits us and we're being challenged, we're too quick to run here.

When this illustration was planned weeks ago, I had no idea where we would be this morning as a church. But, to tell this story and to end this morning this way... This comes out of a devotional that I read often. It's the story of Joseph Scriven who faced real tragedy in his life.

*Born in Ireland in 1819, as a young man, he fell in love, but tragically, on the night before he was to be married, his fiancée drowned. Later, after moving to Canada, Scriven fell in love and became engaged. But, his second fiancée also died before they were married.*

*We can imagine how these painful experiences might have made him bitter, but Scriven, instead, became a devoted servant, serving others and sharing the love of Jesus. He gave freely of his possessions and always was ready to help those who were in need.*

*In 1855, when he learned that his mother was ill, Scriven wrote a poem for her called *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. This later became a powerful hymn where Scriven described that Jesus was, to him, a friend. He described what Jesus meant to him in the lyrics "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear." Because of the difficult experiences he had faced, he could write with conviction "What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer." He knew that God could bring peace to troubled hearts who seek him when he said, "Oh, what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer."*

*Instead of becoming discouraged when we face trials, temptations, or troubles, Scriven wrote that we simply should take it to the Lord in prayer. "What a friend we have in Jesus."*