



Acts 21:1-17 Figuring Out Friendships

Summary: Christians are meant to have friends. How does that happen?

As human beings we are made to be in relationships. Now, you might identify as an introvert or extrovert, a social butterfly or a home body, you might like going out or you might like staying home, but the fact is: you were made to be connected to other people.

You were born into a web of relationships. You have a family – a mother and father, maybe sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles, you definitely have grandparents whether you know them or not, or whether or not they're still alive. You may not like the people you were born into, but you were born into them none-the-less.

That is because when God created the world, He made the earth and the planets and said 'it was good.' He made the mountains and the oceans and 'said it was good.' He made the monkeys and the giraffes and He said 'it was good.' Then He made the first man, Adam. And He said, 'it was *not* good.' It was not good for man to be alone, so He created Eve and now they had each other, they had a relationship. And He told them to be fruitful and multiply, to have kids and fill the earth.

Friends, one of the most basic things you can learn from the Bible is that God wants us in relationships. Romantic relationships in marriage; nurturing relationships in our family; friendships with other people and most important of all – He wants you to be in a relationship with Him.

We talk all the time about the Great Commandment - Love God and Love Others.

But you can't love Him until you understand that He loves you. He loves you so much that He came down from Heaven walked the earth for 30 years trying to tell us about His love and plans, and then died on the cross to repair our relationship with Him. He loves you even if you're completely messed up. God doesn't love perfect people, because there are none. He loves *you* and He wants you to understand that, so that you will love Him back.

You see, the more you understand God's love for you, the more you'll love Him, and become motivated to love others with the same kind of love you've received - a love that initiates relationships, forgives other people, serves other people and is even willing to suffer for other people.

The more you understand the fact that you are loved by God the more you will be able to enjoy true, deep, meaningful friendships with other human beings. You won't look to others for approval so much because you'll know you're messed up, flawed, imperfect, but

God loves you anyway. And you won't expect so much of others because you know the same thing is true of them. And if they're also a Christian they'll know all the same things and you'll be set up for a perfect relationship where you each see Jesus in each other and try to be more like Jesus for each other. If you want to get all fancy and scholastic, you can call it *koinonia*, the Greek word for fellowship, being together, belonging to something together.

This morning we're continuing our study of the book of Acts, the history book of the early church and I want you to see how friendships and fellowship spread along with the gospel. We're reading a section that might seem a little dry, you get a lot of the details about where Paul and his team went and where they stayed, but I want you to see how often people pop up along the way and I want us to think about the friendships in our lives. So read with me, please.

As we jump in, the apostle Paul is traveling in the Mediterranean from the area of modern Turkey to Jerusalem in Israel. He's just said a teary good bye to the leaders of the church in Ephesus

Acts 21:1 Now it came to pass, that when we had departed from them and set sail, running a straight course we came to Cos, the following day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. 2 And finding a ship sailing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. 3 When we had sighted Cyprus, we passed it on the left, sailed to Syria, and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload her cargo. 4 And finding disciples, we stayed there seven days. They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem. 5 When we had come to the end of those days, we departed and went on our way; and they all accompanied us, with wives and children, till *we were* out of the city. And we knelt down on the shore and prayed. 6 When we had taken our leave of one another, we boarded the ship, and they returned home.

7 And when we had finished *our* voyage from Tyre, we came to Ptolemais, greeted the brethren, and stayed with them one day. 8 On the next *day* we who were Paul's companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. 9 Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied. 10 And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his *own* hands and feet, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver *him* into the hands of the Gentiles.'"

12 Now when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem. 13 Then Paul answered, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."



14 So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, "The will of the Lord be done."

15 And after those days we packed and went up to Jerusalem. 16 Also some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us and brought with them a certain Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we were to lodge.

17 And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly.

Now, there are several things for us to talk about and explain here, but the big thing I want to zoom in on is people. Did you see how many people are mentioned? Do you see the evidence of Christian community, fellowship, and relationship during their trip? I want to spent our time this morning making three points: they had a connection with people through Christ; they met physical needs by opening their homes; and, they shared spiritual concerns by praying for and with each other.

So, first of all – they had connections with each other, through Christ. Friends, the Christian faith is meant to be very personal, but it's not private. It's something we work out in relationship with other people. There are over sixty people mentioned BY NAME in the book of Acts, and that doesn't count groups of people like Philip's *four* unmarried daughters.

There are also more than 50 passages in the New Testament that speak of how we should act toward one another.

Jesus said,

John 13:35 By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

So here's the logic: the fact that you have Christian friends, Christian connections - and the quality of those relationships, demonstrated through tangible actions in the real world - is supposed to provide visible evidence to other people of the fact that you follow Christ and what that means: He loves people, so you love people and other people who love Jesus, love you.

People should see that and they should marvel at it, and they should want it for themselves.

Christians are told to accept one another (Rom 15:7), teach one another (Rom 15:14), greet one another (Rom 16:16), wait for one another (1 Cor 11:33), serve one another (Gal 5:13), carry each other's burdens (Gal 6:2), be kind and compassionate with each other (Eph 4:23), forgive each other (Eph 4:32), submit to one another (Eph 5:21), bear with each other (Col 3:13), confess your sins to one another (James 5:16), encourage one another (Heb 10:25) use your gifts to serve one another (1 Pet 4:10); they should not bite and devour one another (Gal 5:26); lie to each other (Col 3:9); slander one another (Jam 4:11) or grumble against each other (Jam 5:9), and on and on it goes.

Because you have a relationship with God you also have a relationship with His people – you have a vertical relationship that powers, propels, and actually creates your horizontal relationships. There are some people that you only know them because you both know Christ. God brought you together. And that is good, He is the common thread of your relationship.

And, point number two, because of that connection, you do things to help others. Everywhere Paul stops on this journey there is some disciple of Christ who opens their home to him, which is remarkable, because at this point Christianity has only existed for about 25 years and yet the faith has spread all over the region. And now, *because they are disciples of Christ*, these people are willing to open their homes and receive Paul's group.

Do you remember the Christmas story? Joseph and Mary, who is pregnant, come to Bethlehem and she gives birth to Jesus and places him in a manger, and we have all these manger scenes each Christmas with shepherds and a donkey and a lamb and Mary and Joseph and the baby laying there. Why did all that happen?



Because there was no room in the inn. OK Jeff, where are you going with this? I'm making the point: there were places you could stay in the ancient world.

No, you couldn't call ahead and make reservations, or set it all up using your app, but there were places to stay, especially in big cities in the ancient world. But Paul doesn't book a room, he's taken in by other people *who follow Christ* and they show him kindness, provide hospitality, share their food, and make room for an unexpected guest. They meet physical needs because God, in Christ, has met their greatest spiritual need.

To this day, if you want to be a leader in the church, you must be hospitable, it's one of the basic qualifications laid out in Scripture in 1 Timothy 3 because it's a tangible way to love people, care for them, and do life with them.

Which brings us to our third point – they had connections with each other because of their connection to Christ, they met physical needs, but undergirding it all, they shared spiritual concerns.

Paul is headed for something difficult. He doesn't know exactly what, but he knows something is coming and it's going to be hard. He's actually saying his final goodbyes to some people on the trip.

And how do people react? They care about him. They pray for him and with him, they weep for him. They say "don't go!" and we'll talk next week about whether they were right or wrong, but for now, I just want to establish the fact that Paul had people he could connect with, everywhere he went, and they cared about each other. This kind of meaningful connection with other Christians was a foundational cornerstone of the early church and should remain so today.

I want you to see this – when Paul was in need, other Christians met his physical needs and encouraged him spiritually. Both. He needed a place to stay, so they took him in. At other times, churches took up a collection to send him support so he could focus on full-time ministry and be freed up from the need to find work. They used their money and their material possessions to be a blessing. But, they also prayed for him and with him, and if you read the Scriptures you’ll find that Paul prayed for them too.

Friends talk about each other, not behind each other’s back, but on their knees to God. How many times have your friends prayed for you? How many times have you received a quick text, or email or note or card in the mail saying, “I’m praying for you. I know you’ve got this thing going on in your life, or even I’m not quite sure what’s going on, but I wanted you to know, I’m praying for you.”

I hope it happens. I hope people do it for you and I hope you do it for others. Encourage one another in Christ. Pray for one another.

I’m so grateful to see the way it’s happening here at City Gates. On any given Sunday if you stick around after the service, you’ll see little clusters of people talking with each other, and often you’ll see they’re praying for each other, with each other. It’s a very natural, normal thing, to say, “Let me pray for you, or let’s pray about that” and then just do it, right then, right there.

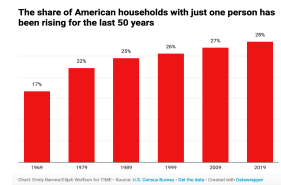
Hold hands, put a hand on each other’s shoulder, or stand six feet apart with masks on if you need, but pray, and then, as you think about the issue or the person throughout the week, pray again, and send them a text or note letting them know you’re praying because again, Christians, this is a cornerstone of the faith – we love each other, care about other, think of one another, and take action for each other.

Many of you know the McCormicks – Chad and Lisa and their kids – they’ve led the AWANA ministry for years. Well, you may also know they’re fighting a fresh diagnosis of cancer – Lisa begins chemo Wednesday morning. She can’t be in here with us because she has to keep her immune system strong, but last Tuesday Pastor Stephen set up a Zoom call for some of us to be able to pray for and with the family – because they asked for it. And it was such an encouraging thing to see and hear people gather online to read Scripture and pray for the McCormicks, with the McCormicks.

But why did any of that happen? Because we all know Christ. God began a relationship with each of us individually and then called us into relationship with each other corporately, and now, on the cusp of this difficult and dangerous journey called cancer, all these people gather together to weep and pray and strengthen and encourage Lisa and the rest of the family. Even her doctor prayed with her as they discussed treatment options – they took their needs to God, together.

Right now the world is simultaneously being brought together by technology and torn apart by factions. Thanks to the internet and smart phones you can talk to anybody, hear anybody, and yet, most people still feel like nobody. People feel alone.

And in some cases, that's because they are. According to the US Census Bureau, 28% of all Americans now live alone. That number has been climbing steadily for years. It was only 17% 50 years ago in 1969.



So, roughly a quarter of all Americans live alone, and we can understand why many of them might feel lonely, but it turns out most of them feel the same way.

Share of Americans who reported being lonely in 2019

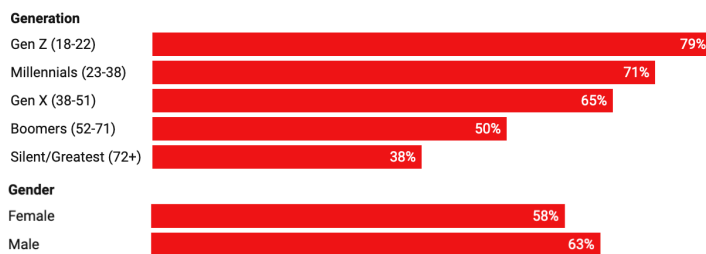


Chart: Emilv Barone/Elijah Wolfson for TIME • Source: CIGNA Survey • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

According to a study reported in Time magazine¹ last year, **before COVID-19**, almost everyone feels lonely – especially the people that no one thinks are lonely – youth and men – they're actually lonelier than everyone else.

Another recent study found that 22% of all Millennials say they have no friends.²

Community is a magical word today - everyone wants it. This is why you're seeing such an explosion in dog parks and group exercise classes like Crossfit and cycling gyms. People want to be around people and make friends *even if they tell themselves they don't*, even if they tell themselves they're fine. They're denying an essential reality – we were made, by God, to be in relationship with Him and because of that, to be in relationship with each other, and we were made to care about each other and help each other physically and spiritually.

So why aren't we doing it more? I'll give you three answers: time, appearances, and acceptance.

Anyone who has been here in DC for than six months will tell you: I'm too busy. I want to get together with people, but I get up, go to work, come home, eat, and I'm exhausted.

I don't know exactly what *you* should do about it – I don't know your calendar and schedule, but I have to encourage you – keep looking for ways to cut things out and become more efficient in the things you have to do. Ask for help if you need it. Almost all of us can find ways to open up our schedule a little bit to be with people. You need it, and they need you. Two books I'll recommend on this, I've shared them both before: What's Best Next by

¹ <https://time.com/5833681/loneliness-covid-19/>

² <https://today.yougov.com/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2019/07/30/loneliness-friendship-new-friends-poll-survey>

Matt Perman and *Ordering Your Private World* by Gordon MacDonald, both Christian authors – they’ll help you consider your priorities and arrange your life and schedule better.

But for starters, would it be possible to make a standing commitment – on the second Friday of every month I keep the calendar open for events with friends? Start small but committed, see where it goes from there, and ask God for help in doing it.

Then, if possible, get together in homes. Restaurants are nice, but order take out, or pizza if you have to, and get together where someone lives – that’s what happened with Paul, people brought him into their homes.

And block time for keeping up relationships with people who aren’t near you – whether family or friends, or even work connections. I spoke with someone recently near the end of their career and he told me how much he regretted not keeping in touch with the people he met along the way - his peers – people he had gone to schools and training and events with. He said, “If only I had spent an hour a week calling people and keeping in touch, I would be in a much better place today relationally - I regret it, I would do it differently.” And there was a real sadness to it.

Madeleine calls her mom almost every week – maybe for only ten minutes, but they stay in touch, and they know how to pray for and with each other.

Here’s something else that keeps us from getting together – especially in our homes: appearances. I’d love to have people over, but the place is a mess.

Years ago Madeleine and I heard a woman speak about the difference between entertaining and hospitality. Entertaining is all about making impressions, wowing your guests, and it has this dangerous tendency to become all about you as the host – look at your impressive sense of style and decor, you’ve got the latest color of paint on the walls, you’re wearing this great little outfit with the latest style and you can’t wait for people to taste this amazing recipe you found – you, you, you.

Hospitality is all about the other person. Now of course, you want to vacuum if you can before they arrive, and treat them well, but that doesn’t mean fancy or extravagant food. We’ve had people over for Saturday breakfast – pancakes or waffles, some bacon and eggs – easy. We’ve pulled leftovers out of the fridge for people who came straight from work.

Peg Pottenger makes a Tortilla Soup in a crock pot that I look forward to any time we get together. After Madeleine’s dad passed away, Cindy Luehrs made a Kale Sausage soup for our family that was so good we asked for the recipe – it’s a few quick ingredients thrown into the stock pot. Nothing super fancy. And besides, if kids are going to be a part of the event, you know most of them just want chicken strips or pizza anyway.

The point is: don’t stress over making a big impression, make it about the people, not all your preparations.

The third reason we don't get together more: acceptance. We're concerned about what people will think of us. One reason some of us don't like meeting new people is because we don't know what to talk about and what if the other person doesn't like me?

Look, that's a valid concern. I get it, I feel it. But here's something you can do - try being accepting instead of being accepted; try being interested instead of being interesting. Care about the other person. Ask questions about them - what do they like to do? What are their hobbies and interests? What are they facing right now?

Years ago I had a conversation with Tim Busch, one of our worship leaders. I learned he once rode a bicycle all the way across America. That's impressive. And then, on the Fourth of July we had the get together here at church and I learned Peter Jasis rebuilds bicycles for fun on the side, so I said, I know someone you need to meet!

You see, often times, relationships can facilitate relationships - you're accepted on the basis who you already know. That's what happened with the apostle Paul, right? Barnabas was in the city of Antioch where the church was growing and he realized they needed some leadership and he said, I know a guy! So he went off and found Paul and brought him in - that launched twenty years of ministry that brings us to where we are in Acts 21.

I had something similar happen recently - we, as a nation are grappling with issues of social and ethnic justice and prejudice. I have spoken several times about the issues but also confessed I don't fully understand all the claims and concerns, but I see people I love hurting and it has my attention.

So then, Don Patterson and Woody Long went to a board meeting with Good News Jail and Prison Ministry, and they ran into their fellow board member, Pastor Bernard Fuller, who happens to be a black man pastoring a primarily black congregation in Lanham MD and they said - these two need to get together.

They connected us and we had a great time of fellowship, prayer, and discussion - he came down here for our first meeting, and I'll be having lunch with him in Maryland next month. And it all happened because two godly men who knew him, also knew me, and put us together.

Who can you do something like that for? Who can you introduce to whom for encouragement and fellowship, or who can you help out by using your connections?

Have you ever called a friend and said, hey, one of my other friends, someone you haven't met is going to be in your area, can you take care of them? We're often willing to do things for strangers simply on the strength of our relationship with a mutual friend.

Well, what if that mutual friend is Jesus? What would you be willing to do for others if Jesus asked you for a favor?

What would you be willing to do for others if Jesus said the two most important things in life were to love God and love your neighbor as yourself?

Friends, do our lives reflect these priorities? Which is longer – your to-do list, or your to-love list? What’s more important to you – people or projects?

I’m working through this issue at the cemetery right now – the fact is, there is a backlog – it takes a while to schedule your loved one’s service at Arlington. So, we want to be able to get more services done, but we also want to do each one well – we need to move families through the system, but we need them to feel loved too – they can’t just be a number when they’re burying their only husband or father. So how do you do both? It’s hard, but it still needs to happen, and it needs to happen well.

You’ve got things in your life that need to happen, projects that need to be completed, tasks that need to be accomplished, but you are also surrounded by people who need to be loved.

Live in the tension between those two – say no or “wait” to your projects sometimes so that you can love and help people. And sometimes tell people that you’ll connect with them as soon as this project is completed – and then keep your word.

And, remember this – it’s not just about what you can do for others, it’s also about what they can do for you – you need to be loved. You need to have friends, not just be a friend. God said it was not good for Adam to be alone, so He created Eve and brought her to him.

When we repent from our sin, God adopts us and puts us into a family. Whether you live alone or with others, whether your family is on the other side of town, the other side of the world or the other side of the grave, you have a Heavenly Father and countless sisters and brothers. You are not alone.

The church today is meant to look like the church in Acts, which means we should be active and involved in each other’s lives – you should be connecting to others, and they should be connecting to you, because you’re both connected to God – this is normal, healthy, Christian behavior.

We’re doing it here at City Gates, but we have to keep doing it, and we need to keep getting better at it, by God’s grace and with His strength. Because, that’s part of what it means to be the church – to be in relationship with God which puts us in relationship with others.

Let’s pray.