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"Ye Are My Friends"

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Among the various titles by which Christians were called in the New Testament surely the most wonderful is that given by the Lord Jesus - "Ye are my friends":

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends if ye do the things which I command you. No longer do I call you servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends: for all things that I heard from my Father I have made Known unto you. Ye did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you, that ye should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should abide" (John 15:13-16).

It is indeed a very wonderful and beautiful thing that the Son of God called such as the disciples were, and such as we are, His friends. I do not think there is a greater or more beautiful word in all our language than that word 'friend'. It is the most intimate title in all human relationships. Every other relationship that we can think of may exist without this. Perhaps we think that the marriage relationship is the most intimate, but it is possible for that relationship to exist without friendship. Happy indeed is the man whose wife is his friend, and happy is the wife whose husband is her friend. It is a very close relationship between children and parents and parents and children, but it is a great thing when the father can call his son his friend, and when he can say, not 'my son', but 'my friend'. And, again, it is a great thing when a child can say, not only 'my father', but 'my friend': 'my father is my friend' - 'my mother is my friend'. It is something extra in relationship. We may admire a person and have a lot of association with them: we may think that we know them and could say: 'Well, I know so-and-so very well', but, even so, there may not be friendship. Friendship is always just

that bit extra.

When Jesus said: "Ye are my friends", He was going beyond 'Ye are My disciples' and 'Ye are My followers'. He could have called them by many other names, but when He said: "Ye are my friends" He went beyond anything else. And I think that the Lord Jesus found the most complete satisfaction of His heart in this word. To say "Ye are my friends" was as far as anybody could possibly go. Really, there is nothing beyond it. You reach the end of all relationships when you really come to friendship. How rich and how precious, then, is this title!

In the picture of the new Jerusalem which we have at the end of the Bible it says: "The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all manner of precious stones" (Revelation 21:19). The foundation of that city was that which was most precious, and I think the most precious foundation of life is friendship. The new Jerusalem itself will be built upon the foundation of the friendship between the Lord Jesus and His own.

Well, that is just a little about friendship. But what is the nature of friendship? We have it here in John 15: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth, but I have called you friends: for all things that I heard from my Father I have made known unto you." Friendship is that position which makes it possible to open the heart fully, to keep nothing back; and to have such confidence that you can trust the other person with all that is in your heart. Jesus said: 'All that the Father has shown Me I have shown you. I have kept nothing back from you. I have put perfect confidence in you. I have had no suspicions of you and have not been afraid to say just what was in My heart.'

You know, that is very wonderful. Go back again in this Gospel by John and in chapter two you will find: "Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, during the feast, many believed on his name, beholding his signs which he did. But Jesus did not trust himself unto them, for that he knew all men, and because he needed not that any one should bear witness concerning man, for he himself knew what was in man" (John 2:23-25).

Jesus knew all men, and because of that He did not commit Himself to them... "Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus" (John 3:1), and what follows shows that Jesus knew Nicodemus and He did not commit Himself to him. Nicodemus was not in the position of a friend, at least, not at this time. How much he was before the end we do not know. He did act like a friend in the burial of Jesus, for something had happened to him by that time. But at this time he was amongst those men to whom Jesus did not commit Himself. He simply said, in effect: 'Before I can commit Myself to you, you must be born again.'

That is the beginning of this friendship. Yes, Jesus has told us that the real nature of friendship is that He can just commit Himself to His friends. He said many things to other people, but He did not put Himself into their hands. And that is all the difference. You may have a lot of fellowship, say a lot of things, and they may be quite true things, but that is not putting yourself into the *hands* of those people. There is all the difference between conversation and fellowship *and* committal. Friendship means that you have committed yourselves to one another - you have really put yourself into the hands of the other person. That is what Jesus said friendship means: "All things that I heard from my Father I have made known unto you." 'I have had no reserves where you are concerned.'

I am sure you are feeling that this is a very wonderful thing and are wondering more and more at it

as we go on. Just think that the Son of God should do that - that He should be willing to commit Himself to some people!

And these were not empty words. He went on to show that He would prove His friendship. What is the proof of friendship? Well, of course, it is firstly, as we have said, committing yourself to the other.

But then Jesus said this: "Greater love hath no man than this. That a man lay down his life for his friends." That is the proof of friendship. How much are you prepared to sacrifice, to suffer and to put up with? "A man lay down his life for his friends." Now, of course, you are thinking of one thing - of dying in some way for your friends. But there are a thousand ways of laying down your life for your friends. It is a matter of laying down *our* lives all the time - not just some big act of dying for our friends, but every day laying down our lives, letting something of ourselves go, letting some personal interest go and just saying: 'That does not matter - it is for my friend. That is not so important - it is for my friend.' Friendship makes everything else unimportant. If there is real friendship we do not stay to say: 'Well, now, must I do that? Am I really obliged to do that? Can I not get out of it in some way? Really, is there any harm in my doing this?'

You know, that is the attitude of a lot of Christians. 'Why may I not do this? Is there any harm in it? A lot of other people do it so why should I not do it? I even know Christians who do it. Must I really not do this?' Supposing Jesus had taken that attitude! No, friendship puts all that kind of thing away and never talks about 'Must I?' 'Is there no other way?' This is a laying down of the life for a friend.

So I say that there are many ways of laying down our life. What is laying down our life? It is just holding that nothing is too valuable or important to be kept from our friend. It does not matter what it costs, or how painful it is - friendship makes it possible.

We have the great illustration in the Bible. There is only one man in all the Bible who was called God's friend: "Abraham... the friend of God" (James 2:23). What a wonderful thing to be said of any man - "Abraham, my friend", said God (Isaiah 41:8). It is God speaking about a man, and He is saying "My friend"! How could God call Abraham His friend? What made Abraham a friend of God? "Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest... and offer him" (Genesis 22:2). What did Abraham say? 'You have asked too much. Isaac is too precious. He is everything to me. Oh, no, I cannot offer him!?' No, Abraham did not talk like that. I think it is most wonderful when it says: "And Abraham rose early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and he clave the wood for the burnt offering" (Genesis 22:3). I venture to suggest to you that if you were faced with that you would not get up early that morning! You would be staying in bed just as long as you could and putting it off as long as possible. But it says: "Abraham rose *early in the morning*." What was he about to do? He was about to enter right into the heart of God in giving his only begotten son, and enter right into fellowship with the passion of God's heart. "God so loved... that He gave *His* only begotten Son." It was because of that that Abraham was God's friend. He had entered right into the heart of God and counted nothing too precious for the friendship of God.

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends", and in offering Isaac Abraham indeed laid down his life. "Abraham, my friend." That is the nature of friendship. And Jesus proved His friendship. This is the proof - that He has laid down His life.

Then we go on to ask another question: What is the basis of this friendship? Jesus knew what was going to happen in the near future, for it was getting very near to the day when they would all

forsake Him, and yet, knowing all that, He said: "Ye are my friends." There must be some basis which is more than just this present time. Jesus was looking beyond the Cross, and He was seeing that the day would come when these men would stand strongly on the ground of the Cross. We now have the full story. Oh, yes, not so long after this they were letting everything in this world go for Him. The Cross had truly entered into their hearts. The spirit of the Cross had truly taken possession of them and they were standing firmly upon that ground. And Jesus knew that that was how it would be. He knew what was going to happen in the next few days, but He was always speaking to them about *afterward*, that human failure was not the last thing and was not going to be the end of everything. To that poor, failing Peter He said this: "And do thou, when once thou hast turned again, stablish thy brethren" (Luke 22:32). 'You are going to have a terrible fall, but that is not going to be the end. You will turn again and you will have a great ministry afterward.'

Jesus was always looking beyond the Cross, and He saw that these men would stand upon the ground of the Cross. The Cross means that you do not hold anything for yourself, but only for your friend, and that was true of these men.

But Jesus also saw something else. He knew that before long they would receive the Holy Spirit and that they would be governed by Him. And when the Holy Spirit really takes possession you can be trusted. These men could not be trusted without the Holy Spirit, but when He came in, then you could depend upon them. They would not be governed by personal interests, nor would they have any fleshly considerations, but they would live by the Spirit and not by the flesh. And Jesus said: 'On that ground ye are My friends, and that day is as though it is now. Ye are My friends because I know that you men are going to stand on the ground of the Cross and are going to be led by the Holy Spirit.'

You see, that is the basis of friendship. If we live on our own natural ground then the Lord will never be able to depend upon us, but if the Cross has done its deep work in our hearts, and if we are really governed by the Holy Spirit, the Lord has all the ground that He requires to commit Himself to us, all that is necessary for Him to say: "Ye are my friends."

I think there was one thing that the Lord Jesus knew about eleven of these men. Yes, they were men of many weaknesses and many failures. They often said the wrong thing and often did the wrong thing, but Jesus knew that He had their hearts. In spite of everything He had captured their hearts. They had a heart for Him. They may have made mistakes, and He knew all about that, but He knew that they had given Him their hearts. They had a heart for the Lord, and that is the basis of His friendship. He is saying: 'Have I really got *all* your heart? I know all about your weaknesses and your failures, but, really, is your *whole* heart over on my side?'

Judas never gave his heart to the Lord. He had a heart for himself and for worldly gain. Jesus could never say to him: 'You are My friend', but He called him "the son of perdition" (John 17:12). But with these eleven He was quite sure where their hearts were. He even saw what would happen when He was on trial and crucified, but He told them what to do and where to meet Him *after* that. He knew that they would come through because they had a heart for Him. You have only to look at these people when Jesus had been crucified and was in the grave. How sad they were! It is as though they had lost everything in life, and they *had* lost everything, simply because they had given their whole hearts to the Lord Jesus. That is the basis of His friendship.

It is in these things, then, that the Lord is able to trust us and commit Himself to us. This is the

relationship that the Lord Jesus wants more than anything else. The breakdown in friendship is so often because of some natural interest arising, some question of how it is going to affect us rather than how it is going to affect Him.

This is something very challenging to our hearts, and it is a lesson that all of us have to learn. I have to learn it, and am trying to do so. You have to learn it - that the greatest thing in all life is how our behaviour affects the Lord Jesus; how our appearance before the world affects the Lord Jesus; how differences between us affect the Lord Jesus. Yes, everything, how it affects the Lord Jesus. You know, that is the very essence of friendship. True friendship is always governed by this: 'I would do nothing to hurt my friend. That is the last thing that ever I want to do!', and Jesus wants to put our lives upon that basis. He will never do anything to hurt us, but how much we hurt Him! We must bring everything to the judgment bar of friendship.

The greatest characteristic of friendship is loyalty. I do not think there is a greater or grander virtue than loyalty. You may not always understand your best friend; he or she may sometimes do things that you cannot understand, things about which you do not feel very happy at the moment, but if it is friendship you are loyal to your friend, whether you understand him or not. You will not betray your friend or talk about him to his detriment, nor do anything that would injure him. You will always be loyal. Faithfulness is the heart of friendship and that is the attitude of the Lord Jesus.

But the Lord wants to put His disciples on the same basis. He wants this spirit and nature of friendship to exist between His own. He wants them to have the same spirit as is in Himself and to be friends of one another. We may say: 'Yes, he or she is my fellow-Christian.' As Christians we may speak of one another as our brothers and sisters, but I have said there is something more than that, more than fellow-Christians, more than brothers and sisters. I suppose I must not put it in the Christian realm and say more than fathers and mothers, but the meaning is the same. There is just that something extra - 'He is more than my brother, he is my friend.' 'She is more than my sister, she is my friend.' Oh, that the Lord might be able to get that kind of relationship!

May He write this word deeply in our hearts and send us back to the places where we are going with a heart wholly for Him! Nothing held back, but a complete committal to Him, that He has us altogether, and by His grace we will never do anything that will hurt Him. We will always ask the question about everything: 'How will this affect my Lord?' You see, friendship has two sides. It is not one-sided. It is not friendship when I do all the friendliness and you do not do any. No, it has two sides. We must be to Him what He is to us, and we must be to one another what He is to us.

Now this is going to be a very difficult thing, but remember the Cross and the Holy Spirit. They are the two great powers which make this possible. The Cross is not only the crucifixion of Christ many years ago: it is a mighty power in life every day. The Holy Spirit is not somebody who came at Pentecost many years ago. He is here today and can be in us, and if He really has the control of our lives the one thing which will concern us most is 'How does my life affect the Lord Jesus?'

Take that message away with you, and seek to live by it in all the days before us.