

What a friend we have in Jesus!

How did you respond when you read that sentence? Did it sweep you back in time like it did for me, back to my childhood church singing along with Mr. Nelson's booming voice as he led our congregation through the hymn by that same name? Perhaps your response was similar to other moments in my life provoking the question, "Is Jesus really my friend...can he really be a friend to a sinner like me?"

In his book *Gentle and Lowly*, Dane Ortland strives to help Christians peer into the heart of Christ to remind us of who he is, particularly in relation to normal Christians (the subtitle helps define the Christians as "sinners and sufferers"). In the 12th chapter titled "A Tender Friend" he says this,

"Who in our lives do we feel safe with – really safe, safe enough to open up to about everything? Here is the promise of the gospel and the message of the whole bible: In Jesus Christ, we are given a friend who will always enjoy rather than refuse our presence. This is a companion whose embrace of us does not strengthen or weaken depending on how clean or unclean, how attractive or revolting, how faithful or fickle, we presently are. The friendliness of his heart for us subjectively is as fixed and stable as is the declaration of his justification of us objectively."

So much could be said related to this short excerpt. Just the concept that Jesus is our friend is mind-blowing enough. But what particularly struck me was the last sentence in the excerpt. To paraphrase, he says that Jesus is as much our friend as he is our justifier. Wow! Have you ever thought of Christ's friendship in that way?

I am confident that because of our shared love for the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, we do not typically struggle to run toward Christ our justifier. It is the very foundation of our faith, the bedrock upon which we plant our feet when, "our ancient foe seeks to do us woe". We trust that in Christ all the demands of the law have been fulfilled. We believe we have been justified by his blood and saved from the wrath of God (Rom 5:9). But at the same time, we may actually struggle to accept that we are also reconciled to him (Rom 5:9-10). We oftentimes act like justification provides a clean slate from which we need to prove our worth to him rather than a door by which we enter into a deep friendship with him.

That is what makes Ortland's point so helpful - Jesus is as strong a friend to us as he is a justifier of us. He not only intercedes as our justifier, thwarting anyone or anything that would attempt to keep us from a right standing (positional relationship) before God, but he also walks beside us *in relationship with us as God!*

Ortland later in the chapter says that before going to the cross, Jesus spent years completely opening himself up to his disciples, holding nothing back.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." (John 15:12-15)

Jesus spent years pouring himself into his friends before he ever poured out his blood on the cross.

What he did for his disciples then, he will also do for you today. Why? Because Jesus has never only been a theological position in which to stand, but has always additionally been a relational person whose bosom we can lean back upon in intimate friendship – John 13:25 NASB’s words, not mine 😊. What a wonderful comfort!

But how can we lean back on Christ’s bosom if we cannot physically be with him? Let me suggest two simple yet practical ways. First, love one another. Christ followers are the physical extension of his body here on earth. It is no surprise then that Jesus said this to his disciples the night before his crucifixion, **“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.”** (Jn 13:34). You can experience his intimate friendship through Christian fellowship.

Secondly, when praying to him. I would imagine Joseph Scriven, the author of “What a Friend We Have In Jesus” penned his poem of comfort to his mother precisely because they were an ocean apart when he wrote it. He wanted her to experience real, intimate friendship with Christ through prayer because Christ could be where he could not. He encouraged from afar by pointing her to the One who is always near.

It seems fitting to end with his poem. I hope they encourage you as they did his mom.

Pastor Brad

What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged;
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
Can we find a friend so faithful
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness;
Take it to the Lord in prayer!

Are we weak and heavy laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge—
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
Do your friends despise, forsake you?
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In his arms he’ll take and shield you;
You will find a solace there.