
What is a Friend?

by: Ronald L. Dart

Several years ago, in the winter I was up in the mountains enjoying our winter vacation. My wife and I were with some old friends, people that we had known for about 20 years, at that time. I knew the fellow from college in Bricketwood, England where I had him in a speech class that I taught. He is what you would really call an old friend. Both of us are getting older, I'm afraid rather rapidly, as those things do happen from time to time.

We had a lot in common over the years. We had both been in the ministry together. We had served together and had helped one another in many ways and we also shared the common experience of being disfellowshipped from our previous church association. In my case a little earlier than in his particular situation. We were sitting by the roaring fire in the fireplace and sitting back chatting together and being mellow about all the various things which we had experienced together as friends will do.

He said, "Ron, what one thing do you miss the most about not being associated with our former church association?" Since the answer to that question would presumably involve a little more thought and a decision on my part, I thought about it and sort of got pensive about it for a minute about what do I miss the most and before I could answer, he said, "I will tell what it is for me."

Missing Friends

He said, "It is friends, the large number, the wide variety, the opportunity for the development of them, the times we had together and all of a sudden now I find myself, not with that many friends as a result of the changes that had taken place."

It is easy for a person to say in that situation, "Well, make yourself some more friends." But you make friends slowly over time and when you suddenly find yourself with the responsibility of building a business and trying to get your house in order and being sure that you're not going to have to have somebody else take care of you in your old age, you don't have an awful lot of time for the things that puts friendships together, for the things that we do as friends in forms of recreation and sharing times, hard times and good times together, the things that tend to bind us together in one way or another.

I knew what he meant, I felt upon reflection that I agreed with him and that's probably what I missed about as much as anything else was the association of friends.

All of Us Have Lost Friends

All of us have lost friends at one time or another for various and sundry reasons. Some of you have shared the same sort of experiences and for the same reasons that my friend and I had. But there are other reasons that you may have lost friends from time to time and it is too easy at a time like that to conclude, "Well, I guess they just were not real friends after all. Because after all, if they had been real friends, they would still be, my friends." At least that was my reaction, that is how I felt about it. I sort of felt like, once a friend always a friend and I got to thinking about that.

An Analogy for Friendships

You know it is really a mistake to think that a friendship is indestructible. For even a true friend and even the closest of friends can be alienated and sometimes it's easier to do, than we would like to admit, or to face up to. Friendship is a hardy plant but it is not a weed. They will not survive just any old kind of treatment.

My wife has found, for example, that by putting a certain types of bedding plants out in the front of the house around the shrubs, they are very hardy and they don't really require a lot of attention. You put them in, you turn your sprinkler on and water them and that's about all there is to it. And throughout the spring and early summer you've got beautiful flowers, all fringing around and under your hedges. One year she decided to put them in the backyard along the edge where the roses were, to make a nice under footing for the roses. That was all fine, except for some strange reason, my dog likes to sit on petunias and other small plants. She could find other areas to sit on the grass or on the bare ground, but for some strange reason she always manages to park herself right on the petunias or some other small plants.

Now they are hardy plants but they really don't do well with your dog sitting on them. Well this is not a very good analogy for friendship but the point is that friendships will survive a lot of things but there are limits and sometimes we can lose real friends along the way and they were not false friends, they were not traitors to us, they were not fair-weather friends, as we are prone to call them. They were real friends but somewhere, somehow along the way something went wrong.

If You Have Lost a Friend

You also need to bear in mind, as I've had to stop and think about myself, if you have lost a friend so has the other person, so has your friend. He lost you as a friend and you know he may be sitting around thinking similar thoughts to yours. It is very possible that there are any number of people in the world right now that you think were your friends, and now you say I don't know if they ever were my friends at all. And probably they sit around some nights with their feet up before the fire saying, "Boy, I sure thought he was my friend, but I guess he really wasn't my friend after all."

False Friends

Now there is such a thing as a false friend, but generally speaking a false friend is a hypocrite, he is a person who really knows he is a false friend, who really knows he doesn't like you, but he is pretending to like you because it suits him for one reason or another. I am not going to talk about false friends.

Conditional Friends

I want to talk about two broad categories, which there seems to be, of friends. The first of these is what I have chosen to call 'Conditional Friends'. A person who likes you because of what you can do for him is a conditional friend. That is easy to follow, isn't it? If you happen to be doing pretty well yourself and you are fairly well-off with money and you take him and his wife out to dinner ever so often, they rather enjoy that, they like that and they enjoy your company. It is a lot of fun, and they are friends of yours but they are to some extent a friend because of what you can do for them. If you are in a position where you have a certain amount of influence and you can actually do them a favor as far as connecting them up to certain people at one time or another, they can like you, they can genuinely appreciate you, but the friendship is to a fairly large extent influenced by what you can do for them. It may not survive if the condition does not survive. It is to say, I will be your friend as long as, I will be your friend until, I will be your friend up to a point, I will be your friend if or maybe or when or whatever the condition that a person sees fit to tie on to the friendship.

A person who likes you for what you have done for him is a grateful person, but he may be a conditional friend. The condition has to do with something that you did and he feels he's the kind of guy who would feel like a terrible ingrate if he wasn't your friend or didn't return the favor.

A person who likes you, because of what he hopes you will become, is a conditional friend. Now does that make any sense to you? A person who thinks that you can be more than you are, a person who hopes for better things out of you, a person who's looking to a better you or the image of you who hopes that you might become, is a conditional friend. And when the time comes when he no longer has any hope that you will ever become what he thinks you will, he ceases to be your friend.

Conditional Church Friends

I think in many churches you can have this type of conditional friends where the people visualize in their mind, an image, an idea, a concept of something ideal or what have you, and when you don't seem to measure up or not measure up quickly enough, or they see that you never will measure up, or whatever they thought they saw, they ceased to be your friend.

Some marriages come apart because of this. A husband and wife get married and the woman might think that someday this man is going to amount to something and then as time goes on he doesn't seem to, and she loses a certain amount of confidence and finally she decides she doesn't love him anymore. It was like conditional love in the first place or maybe she was in love with the image of the man that she hoped for, that she thought he would become, and when she lost the hope, he was no longer her love, he was no longer her friend. It is a wonderful thing when a marriage is built upon romance, love and friendship.

I'm afraid in to many cases, the friendship turns out to be conditional and of course this kind of conditional friendship both in marriage and elsewhere creates a great deal of strain on the relationship because, pressures are always being brought to bear, to be something other than what you are, and maybe you ought to be, maybe you need to be different, maybe you need to be more, maybe you need to be greater, but the continual pressure being brought to bear puts an inevitable strain on the friendship and it is to some extent a conditional friendship.

Conditional Friendships Can Be Reflexive

Conditional friendship is essentially reflexive, by that I mean, the friendship is seen in terms of the self. It has to do with what can be done for me, how do I feel about you, what do I want from you, what do I hope you will become, all the things about you are seen in relation to me and the friendship is built on my reaction to you rather than being built upon you. This is a conditional friendship.

Conditional "In-Group" Friends

A person who likes you as long as you're in the "in-group" is a conditional friend, because the condition of the friendship is that you remain a part of this group and when you leave this group you become a part of the 'out-group' and you are no longer a friend. Now does that mean that you weren't a friend before? Oh no, you were a friend before, he was your friend before and as long as you stayed in the "in-group" you were his friend, but it was a conditional friendship and I'm afraid many religious organizations, which believes in a very strong "in-group" and "out-group" psychology, depend heavily on this psychology for the maintenance of the relationships in the church, inevitably creates conditional friendships. The friendships that exist within the boundaries of such an organization are for the most part going to be conditional friendships.

Unconditional Friends

Now my friend and I both found though, that when we were disfellowshipped from our former church association, we did find that we had a number of unconditional friends. We had a number of people who just didn't pay any attention to the disfellowshipment at all, who said, "Oh No, you are my friend, you will always be my friend, I don't care what anybody says, a friend is a friend." There are people who will have that kind of loyalty and I called them, 'Unconditional Friends.'

This is the second kind of friend that I will talk about. This is a person who likes you. He doesn't like you as long as, doesn't like you until, doesn't like you because of. None of these conditions are implicit in this, he likes you because you are you. No qualifications, no conditions, no as long as, no until, no dependents on group approval, no measuring up required. He is your 'Unconditional Friend.'

An unconditional friend is, generally speaking, not concerned with overhauling you. As I said before, it isn't an idea of a better you, it is you that this person likes and wants for a friend. It isn't another you, a different you, a more you or a less you, or some taller you or a shorter you, it is

you, that is a friend to the unconditional friend. This is not to say that the unconditional friend will approve of everything you do, but the friendship will not hinge on it.

An unconditional friend may be more likely to needle you about a bad habit than a conditional friend, he may be more apt to come up and jab you about it, to say something to you about it or to make a little fun of one of your little problems that you might have. The difference between a conditional friend and unconditional friend is, there is no threat implied, no sanction, no requirement to change, or you will not be my friend.

The conditional friend may hint, may pout, may sulk a little bit, may decide not to speak to you or to speak to you in a certain tone of voice or may decide not to notice you when you walk into a room. You all know the technique don't you? Don't we all know how to employ sanctions against another person who is doing something of which we do not approve. We all know how it's done so I don't need to tell how it is done. When you do this with a friend it is actually implying a conditional friendship because what you're doing is exercising sanctions, you are implying to this person that what you are doing is bothering me and I don't approve, I feel this way about it, don't you know that this affects me and the conditional friendship comes into play, sanctions are brought into play. It is a reflexive action, you are saying to the person you are hurting Me.

Coffin Nails

The unconditional friend may call your cigarettes 'coffin nails'. You may take one, stick it in your mouth, light it up, and your friends will say, "When are you going to stop that?" But you don't react to it quite the same way because you know that your friend cares about you. It is not a question of it hurting you. Your friend doesn't act differently toward you because you smoke, or because you chew, or you dip snuff or whatever other of your particular nauseating little habits might be, but he just says, "I like you, I know you smoke but wish you didn't. I would like to see you get straightened out but that is not going to affect our relationship. It is you that I like, not a non-smoking you or a smoking you or some other kind of you, it is you that I like. You are the guy or are the girl, you are the person that I enjoy being with.

The conditional friend may imply that your smoking inhibits the friendship and if it does you have a conditional friend. Now that doesn't mean that he is a bad friend. It doesn't mean you don't want him as a friend, It doesn't mean that he is a false friend, it just means that there are certain conditions that get inserted into the relationship between friends.

Unconditional Friendships Take Time to Develop

Unconditional friendships usually have a way of lasting. You don't make unconditional friends overnight. You just don't meet some person and all of a sudden you are unconditional friends for the rest of your life. Conditional friendships develop quickly but they can fall apart quickly as well.

Vice Versa

I have already made the point that conditional friends are not necessarily false friends. They are true friends as long as the conditions hold. But one of the things that makes the situation hurt is that conditional and unconditional friendships are not to weigh, in other words, if you are a conditional friend to me, I may be an unconditional friend to you and vice versa. This type of situation can exist. One person may be an unconditional friend and the other one a conditional friend. What happens then is, that when a relationship falls apart, this one person just suddenly loses interest in the other person, or puts the other person away and doesn't want to have anything to do with the other person any more, whereas party number two, who was shunned or put aside, remains a fast and permanent loyal friend to the person who will no longer speak to him.

This happens to people all the time. You know I think in a lot of ways it is a healthy thing for you, even when somebody has decided not to be your friend anymore, for you to try to maintain your friendship regardless of what they do or how they feel, you are still going to be a friend to them if you can. If they will let you.

Friendships Involves Loyalty

When thinking of friendships you have to realize that loyalty is to a large extent one of the biggest elements involved in true friendships. I don't know if I fully understand it. I don't know all the reasoning that is involved in it or all the whys and wherefores, but it does seem that some people seem to be more loyal than others. As a trait of character almost, not just that they're more loyal today or they are less loyal tomorrow but that actually, intrinsically or inherently or ingrained into their character either by training or upbringing or what have you, some people seem to be loyal and other people seem to have no loyalty whatsoever. And of course that has a profound affect on the kind of friendship that you may develop.

David Was Loyal

I was looking through Naves Topical Bible just looking at the topic of friendship to see what sort of things I might find and what was interesting to me was under the segment of illustrations or examples of friendship, there was one person's name who just kept cropping up.

You know there are several different categories mentioned, but one person kept being mentioned more often than any other in this category. You probably already know who I am talking about, his name was David.

David seems to have been an incredibly loyal person because even in the relationship he had with Saul, which was not the kind of a friendship that you and I would tend to think of as hunting and fishing buddies or the kind of lady who would like to sit around in the afternoon with other ladies and have tea and share gossip. It wasn't that kind of a relationship. Saul was the King and David was his servant. But David was incredibly loyal to Saul.

Even at times when Saul had turned on David through jealousy, and Saul did love David, make no mistake about the fact that he loved David, but he also feared him. He began to realize that David had more favor than he did and his jealousy began to consume him and his insanity began

to come upon him, he actually, on more than one occasion tried to pin David to the wall with a javelin and David, because I suppose of his youth and his favor with God but also because he was quick, managed to survive and get away.

On occasion after occasion when David had the opportunity to destroy Saul, he refused to do so. He would not lift up his hand. He would not react and would not answer in kind, would not respond in the same way. When he had the chance to destroy Saul, he wouldn't do it. When he had a chance to smite him and pin him to the ground with a javelin he refused to do it. When he had him in a cave and he could have cut his throat he refused to do it. He only cut off the hem of his garment instead. David was a very loyal person.

David and Jonathan's Friendship

One of the most classic friendships of all time was the friendship that existed between David and Jonathan. Let's go back and look at that for a moment. In a sense it is old hat. It is familiar to us but it is very important, I think, if we are to understand what happens to us, what happens to other people, where some of our friends have gone. And maybe we can try to look in the Bible at some illustrations of friendship and glean from them what we can.

In first Samuel 18 and verse one, "After David had finished his conversation with King Saul, He met Jonathan, the King's son, and there was an immediate bond of love between them, Jonathan swore to be his blood brother {4} and sealed the pact by giving him his robe, sword, bow and belt." Now this is a rare example of a bond of friendship, of an unselfish nature, of an unconditional nature, being sealed almost immediately with the bond between these two young men.

King Saul now kept David at Jerusalem and would not let him return home anymore. He was Saul's special assistant, and {5} "He always carried out his assignments successfully and Saul made him commander of his troops," as time went on the relationship between David and Jonathan became stronger and stronger, but finally after Saul had made two attempts on David's life, "David fled from Naioth in Ramah (1 Samuel 20:1) and found Jonathan, and David exclaimed, "What have I done? Why is your father so determined to kill me?" {2} "That's not true!" Jonathan protested, "I'm sure he's not planning any such thing for he always tells me everything he is going to do, even the little things, I know he wouldn't hide something like this from me. It just isn't so!" {3} "Of course you don't know about it", David fumed, "Your father knows perfectly well about our friendship and he has said to himself, I'll not tell Jonathan. Why should I hurt him. But the truth is that I'm only a step away from death. I swear it by the LORD and by your own soul!"

Now at that point in time Jonathan had no more to say, because whenever you know one another that well, when you are that close, when you know that David would not make that kind of statement to you as your friend unless he knew that it was true, Jonathan's only answer was, {4} "Tell me what I can do." {5} "David replied, "Tomorrow is the beginning of the celebration of the new Moon, always before I've been with your father for this occasion, tomorrow I will hide in the field and stay there until the evening of the third day. {6} If your father asks where I am, tell him that I asked permission to go home to Bethlehem for an annual family reunion." {7} If

he says, "Fine!" then I will know that all is well. But if he is angry, then I'll know that he is planning to kill me." David had no question as what the reply would be.

{8} "Do this for me as my sworn brother or else kill me yourself if I have sinned against your father, but don't betray me to him." {9} "Of course not!" Jonathan exclaimed, "Wouldn't I say so if I knew my father was planning to kill you." The relationship between these two is a beautiful relationship and even here we have a certain amount of disagreement, a certain amount of anger, but notice the straight talk, absolute straight talk, even when there's fuming, a certain amount of anger, a certain vigor, protestation, there is still the absolute bond of honesty between these two men as brothers. {10} "David ask, "How will I know whether or not your father's angry?" {11} "Come out to the field," Jonathan replied. And they went out there together. {12} Then Jonathan told David, "I promise by the LORD, the God of Israel, that by this time tomorrow, or the next day at the latest I will talk to my father about you and let you know at once how he feels about you. {13} But if he is angry and wants you killed, then may the Lord kill me if I don't tell you, so you can escape and live. May the Lord be with you as he used to be." Notice the expression "as he used to be" "with my father."

This is a sad recognition that God was no longer with Jonathan's father Saul. {15} "Remember you must demonstrate the loving-kindness of the Lord not only to me during my lifetime but also to my children, after the Lord has destroyed all of your enemies." A premonition, I think, on Jonathan's part as he knew that he himself would not survive. He knew that he himself would not grow to a ripe old age in the situation that they were in. He was concerned that David would be kind to his children, through his descendants. [16} "So Jonathan made a covenant with the family of David and David swore with a terrible curse against himself and his descendants should he be unfaithful to his promise. {17} Jonathan made David reaffirm again, this time by his love for him, for he loved him as much as he loved himself."

That's interesting, Jonathan had so much confidence in the love of David, that it meant more to him for David to swear by his love for him, than it did for him to swear against himself or his descendants or his family. He said, "You look me in the eye, and you swear on your love for me as a brother that you will do it." David looked him in the eye and swore.

Isn't it wonderful when you actually have someone who is that close to you that if he looks you in the eye and he says, "I will do it," that you can from that moment on proceed without any fear that he will not do it. Do you have any idea how rare that is in the world, that a man's word is his bond and it means that much to him, that if he says "I will" or "I will not," that he swears to his own hurt and does not change. Now whenever you have a friend, someone that you are close to, and you come to the place where you know that is true, then you have yourself an unconditional friend. A man who says "No, by my love for you, by my friendship with you, I will promise you that it will be so or it will not be so, that is an unconditional friend, if you know that he means it. If you don't then there is a problem with the friendship.

Shooting an Arrow

Let's continue in verse 18, "Then Jonathan said, "Yes they will miss you tomorrow, when your place at the table is empty, {19} By the day after tomorrow, everyone will be asking about you."

So they put together a little symbolic thing of shooting an arrow and words that he was to call out so that David would know. They carried it out and sure enough Saul was angry, absolutely furious and Jonathan with a sinking feeling in his heart knew that what David said about his father was true, that he did want David dead and David therefore could not come back. So he gave the signal.

Verse 35, "The next morning, Jonathan went out into the field and took a young boy to gather his arrows, {36} "Start running," he told the boy, "so you can find the arrows as I shoot them. So the boy ran, and Jonathan shot an arrow beyond him, {37} When the boy almost reached the arrow, Jonathan shouted, "The arrow is still ahead of you." This was the signal to David. {38} "Hurry, don't wait." So the boy quickly gathered up the arrows and ran back to his master." He didn't know what Jonathan meant. Only Jonathan and David knew. {40} "So Jonathan gave his bow and arrows to the boy and told him to take them back to the city. {41} As soon as he was gone and they knew that they were alone, David came out from where he had been hiding at the south edge of the field. They sadly shook hands with tears running down their cheeks until David could weep no more." I think they embraced actually and held one another until finally they were just dry from shedding tears on each others shoulders. This kind of love, affection and bond that existed between these two fellows is an incredibly beautiful thing to see. It is so rare in human circumstances for two people to have that kind of love for each other and that kind of dependence on one another.

Verse 42, "At last Jonathan said to David, "Cheer up, for we have trusted each other, and each other's children are in God hands forever, so they departed, David going away and Jonathan returning to the city."

Funeral Song for Saul and Jonathan

Let's turn back now to second Samuel and the first chapter, to follow this story just a little bit further, Saul and Jonathan are dead, David has finally learned about it, and has punished the man who brought the message about it, and in verse 17, we read, "David composed a funeral song for Saul and Jonathan and afterward commanded that it should be sung throughout Israel. It is quoted here from the book, 'Heroic Ballads,' {19} "O Israel, your pride and joy lies dead upon the hills, mighty heroes have fallen, Don't tell the Philistines lest they rejoice, Hide it from the cities of Gath, Ashkelon, let the heathen nations laugh and triumph, O Mount Gilboa let there be no dew nor rain upon you, Let no crops of grain grow on your slopes for there the mighty Saul has died. He is God's anointed king no more.""

What a tragic thing to hear. Here is David who probably had as much reason to hate Saul as any person who ever lived. David was to succeed Saul, who had caused David for years to flee for his life and live as a fugitive, a bandit, with a group of malcontents gathered around him because most of the people there were malcontents, bandits and outlaws, who had finally gathered around David and they were loyal to him certainly. Many of them became his fast friends. But this man Saul who had sought his life and chased him around like a flea on a dog was now dead and David said "There, the mighty Saul has died, He is God's anointed king no more. Both Saul and Jonathan slew their strongest foes and did not return from battle empty-handed. How much they were loved and how wonderful they were."

David loved them both, loved them dearly and loved Saul even in a time when Saul was trying to kill him. These are the words written in the beauty of poetry and this speaks so much of David, a man whose very heart and core of his character was loyalty. Loyalty even to a man who tried to destroy him. "Both Saul and Jonathan, how wonderful they were, they were together in life and in death. They were swifter than eagles, stronger than lions, but now O women of Israel weep for Saul. He enriched you with fine clothing and golden ornaments. These mighty heroes have fallen in the midst of the battle. Jonathan was slain upon the hills. How I weep for you my brother Jonathan, how much I loved you and your love for me was deeper than the love of women, the mighty ones of the fallen, stripped of their weapons and dead."

All that David is saying here is that his love for Jonathan was a different kind of love surpassing romantic love, surpassing sexual love, it was the deepest bond between two human spirits that has to be experienced to be understood. It is a love that some men have been blessed to share with a woman but David himself never had. It was the closest love, it was the warmest love that he had experienced in all of his life from this man. What a beautiful thing to see, this kind of development of a bond of absolutely unconditional friendship.

Was Any of Saul's Family Alive?

Chapter 9 of second Samuel closes out this element of it but it is an important reference. Verse 1, "One day David began wondering if any of Saul's family was still living, for he wanted to be kind to them as he had promised Prince Jonathan. {2} He heard about a man named Ziba, who had been one of Saul servants and he called him, "Are you Ziba?" "Yes sir, I am," Ziba replied. {3} The King then said, "Is anyone left from Saul's family? If so, I want to fulfill a sacred vow by being kind to him." Ziba replied, "Yes, Jonathan's lame son is still alive." {4} "Where is he?" the king asked. "In Lo-debar," Ziba told him, "at the home of Makir." {5} So David sent for Mephibosheth; he was Jonathan's son and Saul's grandson. He arrived in great fear and greeted the king with great humility bowing low before him."

He had good reason to fear, because in this time the way you normally handle things when a dynasty was replaced is that you destroyed all of the children of the preceding King, you wiped out the whole house, all the wives and children, you got rid of the concubines, you took care of the whole thing so there would never be a question about succession at a later time.

Mephibosheth had reason to fear, {7} But David said, "Don't be afraid, I have asked you to come so I can be kind to you because of my vow to your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land of your grandfather Saul and you shall live here in the Palace. {8} Mephibosheth fell to the ground before the king. "Should the king show such kindness to a dead dog like me?" he exclaimed. {9} Then the king called in Saul's servant Ziba and put him over the house and established everything that was to be done for Mephibosheth, as a descendent of Jonathan."

This is a fascinating example and I never tire frankly of looking at the examples of David and his life and the way he dealt with people.

Rebellion of Absalom

One of the more interesting examples and it actually brings out some fascinating illustrations of both conditional and unconditional friendship that follow as a result of the rebellion of Absalom which follows in the chapters just following where we have just been in second Samuel. You're probably fairly familiar with the story. Amnon, sort of a half-brother to Absalom, had raped Absalom's sister. He humiliated her, and they tried to keep it quiet as a family scandal but Absalom never forgot it. A year went by, two years went by, then he set up an occasion to gather the King sons together and conned Amnon into coming and had him murdered on this particular occasion. As a result of it, it created quite a furor and scared everyone half to death because they thought Absalom had murdered all of David's sons, not just one, but it had only been revenge on this one man that he wanted. Absalom went into exile and the smoke cleared for just a little while and finally Joab arranged to get Absalom brought back from his exile. When he came back and he finally was reconciled to his father David, some interesting things began to take place.

I am in second Samuel and Chapter 15, "Absalom bought a chariot and horses, and he hired fifty footmen to run ahead of him. {2} He got up early every morning and went out to the gate of the city. When people brought a case to the king for trial, Absalom called him over and expressed interest in his problem. {3} Then Absalom would say, "I can see that you are right in this manner. It's unfortunate that the king doesn't have anyone to assist him to hear these cases. {4} I wish I were the judge. Then anyone with a lawsuit could come to me, and I would give them justice!"

This is so slimy and so obvious that you would wonder that anyone ever would tumble to it.

Verse 5, "And when anyone tried to bow before him, Absalom wouldn't let them. Instead, he took them by the hand and embraced them. {6} So in this way, Absalom stole the hearts of all the people of Israel." It is really relatively simple to do, people want to hear things and if you will tell them what they want to hear, it's not difficult to steal people's hearts.

He continued on for a while and after four years, Absalom set up a rebellion, executed his rebellion and began to march on Jerusalem. He actually went to Hebron, gathered together people there, sent spies all over the place to incite rebellion and said, "When you hear the trumpets declare Absalom has been crowned in Hebron."

Verse 13, "A messenger soon arrived in Jerusalem to tell King David, "All Israel has joined Absalom in a conspiracy against you!" Had David known what was going on he could have easily taken care of it, but the problem is when someone's doing something like that, he knows what he's doing and you don't. So the honest man almost inevitably gets blindsided, left out, or hanging out bare and suddenly wonders what happened to him. David was not the sort of a person to think in these terms. He was not a conspiratorial, he was not a conspiratorial type of person, he didn't think in terms of the exercise of power in that way. He had a few people around him that did but even they were unaware of what was taking place.

David Flees to Spare Jerusalem

When David heard this, he said, {14} "We must flee at once, or it will be too late! If we get out of the city before he arrives, both we and the city of Jerusalem will be spared from disaster."

David knew that if he stayed, and a battle was fought, who knows how many lives would've been lost, the city destroyed, what a terrible wreckage it would've been.

{15} "We are with you," his aides replied, "Do as you think best. {16} The King and his household set out at once, He left no one behind except ten of his young wives to keep the palace in order. {17} David paused at the edge of the city to let his troops move past him to lead the way. {18} Six hundred Gittites who had come with him from Gath, {19} But suddenly, the king turned to Ittai, the captain of the Gittites, and asked, "What are you doing here?" Now these people were not Israelites, they were foreigners who had come to Israel, as exiles from their own country and they had come under David's wing, and David had accepted them in his country.

David said, "What are you doing here? Go back with your men to Jerusalem to your King for you are guests in Israel, a foreigner in exile. {20} It seems but yesterday that you arrived and now today should I force you to wonder with us to who knows where. Go back and take your troops and may the Lord be merciful to you," {21} Ittai replied, "I vow by God and by your own life that wherever you go I will go no matter what happens, whether it means life or death." That my friends is an unconditional friend, whether it means life, whether it means death, whether we go north, whether we go south or east or west, whether we go up in the mountains or down in the valleys, I'm going where you're going. My men are your men. My life is your life, you live, I live, you die, I die. That's basically what amounted to this man. That is a friend.

When the time comes to go to battle, when the time comes to the fight, that's the kind of a friend that is good to have, an absolutely unconditional friend. So David replied, {22} "All right, come with us." So Ittai and his 600 men and their families went along. {23} There was deep sadness throughout the city as the King and his retinue passed by, crossed the Kidron Valley and went out of the country. {24} Abiathar and Zadok and the Levites took the Ark of the Covenant of God and set it down by the road until everyone had passed. {24} Following David's instructions, Zadok took the Ark of God back into the city. "If the LORD sees fit," David said, "He will bring me back to see the Ark and the Tabernacle again. {26} But if he is through with me, then let him do what seems best to him."

This was an incredibly sad day but the loyalty comes out, the loyalty is still there, the full realization that if God is finished with me, let God do what seems best to Him. If he isn't, then I will be back to see the ark here.

{27} "Then the king told Zadok the priest, "Look, here is my plan. Return quietly to the city with your son Ahimaaz and Abiathar's son Jonathan. {28} I will stop at the ford of the Jordan River and wait there for a message from you. Let me know what happens in Jerusalem before I disappear into the wilderness." {29} So Zadok and Abiathar took the Ark of God back to the city and stayed there." Two more loyal friends, unconditional friends, dependable friends.

David's Adviser Ahithophel Backs Absalom

{30} "David walked up the road that went to the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went, his head was covered and his feet were bare as a sign of mourning. And the people who were with him covered their heads and wept as they climbed the mountain. {31} When someone told David that

Ahithophel, his adviser, was backing Absalom, David prayed, "O LORD, please make Ahithophel give Absalom foolish advice." This man was a quite a wise man, his reputation was such that asking advice from Ahithophel was like asking counsel at the oracle of God. He was that brilliant.

Ahithophel had been David's friend, but it was a conditional friendship. He was David's friend when David was in power, but when the power was beginning to shift, Ahithophel decided that he would be Absalom's friend now.

2 Samuel 15:32 "As they reached the spot at the top of the Mount of Olives where people worshiped God, David found Hushai the Arkite waiting for him. Hushai had torn his clothing and put dirt on his head as a sign of mourning. {33} David told him, "If you go with me, you will only be a burden. {34} Return to Jerusalem and tell Absalom, 'I will now be your adviser, just as I was your father's adviser in the past.' Then you can' frustrate and counter Ahithophel's advice."

David sent back a mole as it were, a spy as it were. A man not to do anything except give advice in this situation.

{35} "Zadok and Abiathar, the priests, are there. Tell them the plans that are being made to capture me, {36} and they will send their sons to find me and tell me what is going on." {37} So David's friend Hushai returned to Jerusalem, getting there just as Absalom arrived."

Ziba

Let's continue in second Samuel chapter 16 and verse 1, "David was just past the top of the hill when Ziba, the manager of Mephibosheth's household, caught up with him. He was leading two donkeys loaded with two hundred loaves of bread, one hundred clusters of raisins, one hundred bunches of grapes, and a skin of wine. {2} "What are these for?" the king asked Ziba. And Ziba replied, "The donkeys are for your people to ride on, and the bread and summer fruit are for the young men to eat. The wine is to be taken with you into the wilderness for those who become faint." {3} "Where is Mephibosheth?" the king asked him. "He stayed in Jerusalem," Ziba replied. "He said, 'Now I will get to be king, today I will get back the kingdom of my grandfather Saul.'" {4} "In that case," the king told Ziba, "I give you everything Mephibosheth owns." "Thank you, sir," Ziba replied.

This is fascinating, you don't really know for sure just what happened here, because later on Mephibosheth will deny everything that Ziba said and will have his reasons why he was where he was and they will sound very plausible and very reasonable at the time. You have one of two cases, you have a man named Ziba, who was David's friend, an unconditional friend of David, or you have a man who said to himself, "Well, you never know, here comes Absalom. Maybe what I need to do is take out a little bit of insurance and so he loads up his insurance policy, and he takes it out to meet David and he gives David the animals, he is working the relationship, so that if David ever comes back, he will then own everything of the properties that had originally belonged to Saul. Neat little piece of work.

Now what kind of a friend is this? This is not a conditional friend, this is a false friend, one who knows what he's doing and lying through his teeth. Now occasionally you're going to encounter such a person, such a politician.

Conditional Enemy?

{5} "As David and his party past Bahurim, a man came out of the village cursing him. It was Shimei son of Gera, a member of Saul's family. {6} He threw stones at the king and the king's officers and all the mighty warriors who surrounded them. {7} "Get out of here, you murderer, you scoundrel!" he shouted at David. {8} "The LORD is paying you back for murdering King Saul and his family. You stole his throne, and now the LORD has given it to your son Absalom. At last you will taste some of your own medicine, you murderer!"

Now I don't know what we have here? Do we have here a conditional enemy? Who was not really an enemy as long as it was too dangerous but now he is. I don't think so, because really it is just about as dangerous for a friend to do this at this moment as it would be at any other time in his life, for there were standing all around David, men who with one stroke of their sword could've left his head rolling on the ground.

These were mighty men, men of war, men of valor, men who could take on ten men at a time and come out winners. These men were standing right by David, while he was making this kind of a statement.

They said, {9} "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king?" Abishai demanded. "Let me go over and cut off his head!" {10} "No!" the king said. "If the LORD has told him to curse me, who am I to say no?" {11} "My own son is trying to kill me, this Benjamite is merely cursing me.

Leave him alone and let him curse me, for the LORD has told him to do it.

{12} Perhaps the LORD will see that I am being wronged and will bless me because of these curses." {13} So David and his men continued on, and Shimei kept pace with them on a nearby hillside, cursing as he went and throwing stones at David and tossing dust into the air. {14} The king and all who were with him grew weary along the way, so they rested when they reached the Jordan River."

Advice From Counsels

So the events continue on as the politics, and the palace intrigue continued. Ahithophel advised Absalom to go sleep with your father's wives," verse 21, "for he has left them here to take care of the house, then all Israel will know that you have insulted him beyond the possibility of reconciliation and they will close ranks behind you. {22} Then they erected a tent on the roof of palace, right where everybody could see what he was doing and he went in to them, his father's concubines."

Now second Samuel, chapter 17 and verse 1, "Now Ahithophel urged Absalom, "Give me twelve thousand men to start out after David tonight." This was the right thing to do. To go after him, right now and destroy him. {2} "I will come upon him while he is weary and discouraged. He and his troops will be in a panic, and everyone will run away. Then I will kill only the king, {3} I will let all those with him live, and I will restore him to you. {4} Absalom and all the other leaders of Israel approved the plan. {5} But then Absalom said, "Ask Hushai the Arkite, what he thinks about this?"

This is the man that David sent back to defeat the counsel of Ahithophel.

{6} "When Hushai arrived, Absalom told him what Ahithophel had said. Then he asked, "What is your opinion? Should we follow Ahithophel's advice? If not, speak up."

{7} "Well," Hushai replied, "This time I think Ahithophel has made a mistake. {8} You know Absalom's father and his men; they are mighty warriors and are probably upset as a mother bear who has been robbed of her cubs." Now that made sense. You can't argue with that.

"Remember that your father is an old experienced soldier. He won't be spending the night among the troops. {9} He has probably already hidden in some pit or cave. And when he comes out and attacks and a few of your men fall, there will be panic among your troops, and everyone will start shouting that your men are being slaughtered. {10} Then even the bravest of them, though they have the heart of a lion, will be paralyzed with fear. For all Israel knows what a mighty man your father is and how courageous his warriors are." And that is very true.

{11} "What I suggest is that you mobilize the entire army of Israel." Let's go out and swat this flea with a sledge hammer. Don't take any chances. Meet them with massive force. This made good military sense. The problem was, it was a wrong way to go on this particular occasion. When they finally did it, when they went out and fought, David and his men defeated them soundly and Absalom was killed" and that part of the story we all know.

David's Return to Jerusalem

What is interesting to me is David's return to Jerusalem after this is all over. Let's go over to chapter 19 and verse 15, "So the king started back to Jerusalem, and when he arrived at the Jordan River, it seemed that everyone in Judah had come to Gilgal to meet him and to escort him across the Jordan River." There would be now no want of conditional friends.

{16} Then Shimei son of Gera, the Benjaminite, from Bahurim, the man who hurried across with the people of Judah to welcome King David; {17} A thousand men from Benjamin, including Ziba, the servant of Saul, with his fifteen sons, twenty servants, they all rushed down to the Jordan to arrive ahead of the king, {18} They all worked hard while the crossing was taking place, to bring over the king's household, and to do his pleasure. "

"As the King was crossing, Shimei fell down before the king, {19} and pleaded, "My lord, please forgive me and forget the terrible thing I did when you left Jerusalem; for I know very well how

much I have sinned. {20} That is why, I have come this day, the very first person in all of the tribe of Joseph to greet you"

How fascinating! This is the man, who like a madman, like a wild man, was throwing dust in the air and throwing rocks at David, calling him a murderer when David was leaving Jerusalem with his feet bare and his head bare, and dust cast upon his head in a state of mourning because of what was taking place. This is a true conditional friend but he was sorry.

{21} Then Abishai said, "Shimei should die, for he cursed the Lord's chosen king!" {22} "Don't talk to me like that !" David exclaimed. "This is not a day for execution but for celebration for I am once more the king of Israel!" {23} Then, turning to Shimei, David vowed, "Your life is spared."

I hope that I would do that. I am not sure that I would. I hope that I would if I were ever in that circumstance.

{24} "Now Mephibosheth, Saul's grandson, arrived from Jerusalem to meet the king. He had not washed his feet or clothes nor trimmed his beard since the day the king left Jerusalem."

This is a very important statement, for it tells a great deal about what Mephibosheth was really doing and who was really telling the truth. If you think about it for a moment, how in the world, when the king comes back, what is Mephiboshetham going to say to the king? "Oh no, what that man said about me wasn't true, I have been behind you all the way." Mephibosheth knew what he was up against from the day David left, till the day he came back. He had not shaved nor cleaned himself. He must've looked awful but it spoke volumes about what he was saying, and the truth of what he said and so when he told him, {26} "Look Ziba deceived me, I told him, "Saddle my donkey so I can go with the king, For as you know I am lame. {27} Ziba has slandered me by saying that I refused to come. But I know that you are like an angel of God, so do what you think is best. {28} I and all my relatives could expect only death from you, my lord, but instead you have honored me among those who eat at your own table! So how can I complain?" {29} "All right," David replied. "My decision is that you and Ziba will divide the land equally between you." {30} "Give him all of it," Mephibosheth said. "I am content just to have you back again!"

I am surprised that David didn't take off Ziba's head. But it seems as though that David did not want to sit as a judge on this manner. I don't know who is telling the truth and who is not. You will split the land between you.

Barzillai

There was with David an old man named Barzillai, he was a friend of incredible proportions in a lot of ways to David and you know there is no friend like a friend who was with you when things are bad, the fellow who doesn't desert you when the going is rough, whenever things are at its absolute darkest, the one person who says, "No, you come over here and you stay with me. I'll take care of you and you don't have anything to worry about, someone whom you really can depend upon at the very worst time in your life. There's a bond of friendship that can be created there that is almost impossible to understand.

This Barzillai fed the King and his army during their exile. Let's continue in 2 Samuel 19 and verse 31, "Barzillai now arrived from Rogelim to conduct the king across the Jordan. {32} He was very old, about eighty, and very wealthy. {33} "Come across with me and live in Jerusalem," the king said to Barzillai. "I will take care of you there." {34} "No," he replied, "I am far too old for that. {35} I am eighty years old today, and life has lost its excitement. Food and wine are no longer tasty, and I cannot hear the musicians as they play. I don't get any excitement out of the dancing girls anymore. It would only be a burden to my lord the king. {36} Just to go across the river with you is all the honor I need! {37} Then let me return again to die in my own town, where my father and mother are buried. But here is my son Kimham. Let him go with you and receive whatever good things you want to give him." Do unto him as seems to you.

Truth and Confidence in a Friendship

Now there is an interesting exchange here and it is not carried out in the Living Bible in which I am reading, it doesn't really quite say it like the King James says it and like it really is. Essentially what he said is, "Here is my servant Kimham, you take him and you do whatever seems good to you to him. Whatever you think you wanted to do for me. {38} Then David said, "All right, he shall go with me but I will do for him anything you ask me to do. What ever you want me to do, I will do that to this man." Now the exchange that takes place between these two men is, I think, one of the most profound illustrations of the trust and the loyalty that goes into a friendship that I could ever find. It is a situation where the one man says to the other, "Look, you do whatever you think is good." The other man, says "Oh no, I am going to do for this fellow anything you ask me." You know, that basically says, "I know I have confidence, I really have trust, that you are not going to ask me anything that would be harmful to me. I have total confidence in you, you ask anything of me you want and I will do it.

How many people do you know that you could say that to? That you could actually look them in the eye, take their hand in your hand, and say "What ever you want me to do I will do it." Now you are getting down to an unconditional friendship, true unconditional friendship, and that's the kind of relationship that existed between these men. You know you don't say that to people you don't know very well.

How in the world could someone back during a war, meet some girl and get married a week later. How could they ever possibly know the other person well enough that either one could say to the other one, "I'll do anything you want, whatever you ask," for you have no idea what sort of the demand that might be made of you. You have to know someone, you have to trust someone, you have to have a tremendous amount of confidence in the person to do that.

Never Abandon a Friend

In the 27th. chapter of Proverbs and verse 10 is a very interesting and I think is a very important statement, King Solomon says, "Never abandon a friend--either yours or your father's"

Why do we let friends go? You know you say, "I have lost a friend." There were people that were your friends and they are not your friends any more. Why have you let them go? Or do you

feel that you didn't really let them go but maybe they let you go, but the truth is, in many cases this has happened to us where friends are concerned, and in some cases we go on for months, maybe years and never contact that person at all. Why do we let them go? You see in some cases they are sitting on the other side of this thing saying, why has he left us? Why hasn't he called? Why hasn't he said anything? Both of you are wondering why the other hasn't called or contacted them? Why has this friendship come apart? You spend the rest of your life wondering whatever went wrong between us as friends. Why is it that we don't make contact? It's hard to say isn't it?

Maybe it the fear of rejection? We may think if I say something to him or write a letter I'll just get rejected or I will get a hostile response or he'll turn me down and I'll feel terrible about it. I suppose that's part of it. It may be even the fear of being misinterpreted and somebody will think it is weakness or an admission of guilt of some kind.

I know in my own case, I thought, if I communicate or write to this person is he going to think that I am just trying to get back in his good graces. Or am I going to crawl back into a religious organization that I have long since left and I could not support. Will he misinterpret why it is I'm trying to communicate with him? I know that that kind of question has to cross our minds from time to time. And yet we have to try.

Two Adjoining Rooms

I thought in a way it is like you have two adjoining hotel rooms. You know how those rooms are, they have double doors between them and there's only one knob on the room side of each door, either door can be opened and you still can't get through to the other room. You can open the door on your room side but not the other door. There is no door knob, all you see is the other door. You can't get through to the other room.

I think what a lot of us end up doing is, for the longest period of time, we assume that the door on the other side is locked and closed? We never get around to opening the door in our room to see if the other door is open. Or is there a possibility the other door is open and we might be able to communicate with an old friend yet one more time?

Reconciliation

Well, frankly in a lot of situations, we get involved in reconciliation and unfortunately it is a long way off and sometimes it may never take place but you know it is worthwhile. I did it myself a while back and I wrote a letter to an old friend that I hadn't talked to in a long time for no other reason than to tell him the door on my side was open, it is not locked any more and my home is open to you or if you are in the area please call or come by. I would like to be friends with you again. I haven't heard from him yet. I may never hear from him but at least I did open the door on my side and didn't allow the thing to just drift along to whatever period of time where neither one of us would ever make a move toward reconciliation.

You know it is the funniest thing, because you think to yourself, at a time like that, well shall I write or not. If the other person makes the first move, then I am going to feel that he had an advantage over me but on the other hand if I make a move he will feel the same way. You can

really get so bound up in your mind about what might happen or what could happen? I don't know but you have to ask the question, could it be worse than it is now? Could I estrange us any further or should I not say something?

You know, when you start thinking about reconciliation, the hard part is trying to get into what people call a win-win situation, that is where both of you are able to stand up, not crawl, no one has to be eat crow, no one has to back down, no one has to kowtow to another, if you have a win lose situation. A true friendship can only be created in a situation where both people win.

One of the things perhaps, if you have been estranged from a friend, an old friend, is how can I reach out to this person in such a way that it will be very clear that neither one of us has to crawl in order for us to be friends, to be close, to love one another and maybe someday have a little bit of what we had before. Is there a way? Maybe? Maybe there isn't? But at least from your perspective wouldn't you sleep better at night knowing that you had at least done whatever little thing might be doable to make it work?

What Does It Take To Be A Friend Of Jesus?

In John chapter 15 and verse 9, Jesus makes an interesting statement to his disciples. He said. "I have loved you even as the father has loved me. You live in my love. {10} When you obey me, you are living in my love, just as I obey my father and I live in his love. {11} I have told you this so you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your cup of joy will overflow. {12} I demand that you love each other as much as I love you. {13} Here's how to measure it - the greatest love is shown when a person lays down his life for his friends and you are my friends if you keep my commandments." You know that is an interesting statement, you are my friends if you obey me. It harkens back in a way, in my mind, to that statement that David made to Barzillai (2 Samuel 19:38), "You name anything and I will do it." Barzillai said, "No, no, you do whatever you feel is right." It is almost giving carte blanche to the other person. That's what you and I are expected to do, where Jesus is concerned, if we are to call Him a friend.

"You are my friends," Verse 14, "if you obey me. {15} I will no longer call you slaves, for a master does not confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me." Jesus Christ is an unconditional friend to everyone of us. An unconditional friend to absolutely everyone of us. It's not too difficult, frankly, when I go through the thing that I went through here for you to sit back and say to yourself, "Yeah, old so and so was a conditional friend. John was a conditional friend. And Joe over here was a conditional friend. But Mark was an unconditional friend."

What kind of friend are you?

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you lost a friend?
2. Before the friendship ended, did you try to communicate with your friend, or did the friendship just slowly fade away without anyone trying to find out why?
3. Have you ever considered the fact that your lost friend may have the same thoughts about you as you have about them as to why the friendship ended?
4. Have you encountered ‘conditional friends’? Have you ever treated someone the same way (had conditions on them)?
5. What makes a good friend in your opinion?
6. Do you meet those qualifications?
7. Do you have at least one unconditional friend? What is different about this friendship than all your others?
8. What qualifications did Jesus say a good friend should have?
9. What other examples are there in the Bible, other than David and Jesus, which show an unconditional relationship?
10. How would you answer Ron Dart’s question “Why do we let friends go”?