

The Friend of Sinners

by Mariano Di Gangi

Jesus invites us to become his friends through his initiative of grace, and offers us the blessings of his undeserved love and the possibility of living a fruitful life, in exchange for our obedience to his commandments.

Duration: 28:45

Scripture: John 15:9

Topics: "Jesus", "Friendship with Jesus", "Grace and Obedience"

Description

Mariano Di Gangi concludes his sermon series on the Gospel of John by portraying Jesus as the 'Friend of Sinners.' He emphasizes that Jesus invites everyone, regardless of their past or social status, to become His friends through His unmerited grace. Di Gangi illustrates this friendship through various biblical accounts, highlighting how Jesus reached out to the marginalized and sinful, offering them love, acceptance, and the promise of a fruitful life. He stresses that true friendship with Jesus is demonstrated through obedience to His commands, particularly the command to love one another. The sermon culminates in a call to embrace this friendship and reflect it in our relationships with others.

Transcript

During these Sunday evenings, we've been traveling through the gallery that is the Gospel According to John, and we have seen several self-portraits of Jesus. Jesus describes himself as the bread of life, as the light of the world, as the only shepherd of the flock, as the only way to God, as the resurrection and the life, as the sovereign who stoops to serve the needs of others, as the vine whose vitality comes crackling through the branches so that they bear fruit. This evening, we conclude this series considering the self-portrait of Jesus in which he depicts himself as the friend of sinners.

And our text is found again in the Gospel According to John, chapter 15, beginning to read at the ninth verse. Jesus says, As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.

If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands, and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. My command is this, love each other as I have loved you.

Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business.

Instead, I have called you friends. For everything that I learned from my Father, I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command, love each other. Jesus, friend of sinners.

And the first thing that we should notice is that he invites the likes of you and me to become his friends. He says, you are my friends. How do we become his friends? Is it a matter of going through a rigid ascetic discipline? A matter of performing all kinds of good works in order to merit entry into the family circle of Jesus? Not at all.

Religion tells us that, but the gospel says something else. You and I can enter the family circle of our Lord. You and I can be numbered among his choicest friends, not because of any works of righteousness that we have done, not because of any merit that we have been able to accumulate through our own endeavors and efforts, but because of his initiative, his choice, his grace.

You are my friends, but remember you have not in the first instance chosen me. I have reached out and chosen you. How do we become friends of Jesus? By an act of unmerited grace on his part, reaching out, reaching down to us, and drawing us upward into his company.

And that, of course, is what you read in the New Testament scriptures repeatedly. Anyone stricken with the scourge of leprosy was put aside, became a social outcast, but Jesus went to those who were stricken with this dread disease, and he not only approached them, he not only engaged them in conversation at close quarters, but he actually reached out and touched them and made them clean. You have not chosen me.

I have chosen you. He goes to the town of Jericho, and sitting in the dusty wayside, there is a man named Bartimaeus, and Bartimaeus is blind, and Bartimaeus' situation is complicated by poverty, and this blind beggar sits by the side of the road, and he hears that Jesus is around, and he calls out his name, and unlike the crowd that would want him to shut up or go away, Jesus reaches out and enriches this man by restoring his sight and making him his friend. He goes to a man who is chained among the tombstones because he is possessed by unclean spirits that make him totally unmanageable in human society, and Jesus goes to the Gadarene demoniac and deals with him, and with divine authority evicts the powers of evil from his life, so the man is seen clothed and in his right mind.

Jesus befriended him when all others would have relegated him to the edge of society. And then you've got a woman who had gone through five husbands and now lived in a relationship that he wasn't even dignified with the title of a sixth marriage, and she comes to the well of Jacob to draw water. She comes at a time when no one else will be around because she can't stand the gossiping tongues of those who justly criticize her immoral lifestyle.

But Jesus sits by that well, and Jesus asks her for something to drink, and Jesus promises her the water of life, which will slake her thirst and bring her soul real satisfaction. And he enables her to see what she really is, and gives her a glimmer of what she can yet become through his transforming friendship. And Jesus befriends the woman of Samaria as he had befriended the Gadarene demoniac.

He goes to a man filled with pessimism, driven by doubt, gloomy time after time, and he taps Thomas on the shoulder and he says, I want you to be part of my family circle. He goes to a big-hearted but

big-mouthed, impulsive man who makes promises that he does not keep, and he knows what Peter can become. Unstable as water, he can become as firm as rock through the transforming friendship of Jesus.

You, Peter, have not chosen me, but I have chosen you. And what about those men who engaged in the business of collecting taxes from fellow Jews for the Gentile Roman army of occupation? Disreputable publicans enriching themselves by getting their hands in the till to complicate their ostracism. And Jesus seems to go out of his way to take a man named Matthew and make him one of his apostles.

And another called Zacchaeus, and he brings him down from his tree perch, visits his home, and brings him salvation. How do you become a friend of Jesus? Not by merit which commends you to him, but by his initiative of grace. I have chosen you.

And this will continue right on through his last expiring breath upon the cross for being crucified between two thieves, when one of them says, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. What does Jesus say? Today, you will be with me in paradise. What a friend for sinners.

Inviting them, drawing them, reaching out to them. The initiative, the priority, the grace is all on his part. What we do is to say yes to Jesus.

Now the fact that Jesus reached out to all sorts and conditions of men and women brought him a lot of criticism. For in the middle of the 11th chapter of the gospel according to Matthew, we are told that he is denounced as a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of publicans and sinners. And they made that a point of criticism against Jesus.

But that did not discourage him. For you read on a few more verses in that same 11th chapter of Matthew and he persists in his quest. And he says, come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, all of you who are bruised and broken and burdened in the battle of life, and I will refresh you.

You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you. Jesus invites us to be his friends. And that is what biblical evangelism is all about.

God speaking through us, issuing the invitation of Jesus who still wants men and women to become his friends. Now the second thing that we should notice is that Jesus welcomes his friends to receive blessings. And in the few verses that we have read, there is a treasury of blessings that Jesus offers to those who become his friends.

For one thing, he offers us the inestimable blessing of his undeserved love. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you who are my friends. The Father certainly loved Jesus.

At the time that Jesus was baptized, the heavens were opened, the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove, and there was heard the resounding voice of God the Father saying, this is my beloved son. Again upon the holy mount, the majesty of Jesus is revealed as he is transfigured and he speaks with Moses and Elijah, and there is heard a voice like thunder coming from heaven, this is my beloved son. With him I am well pleased.

As the Father loved the Son, so the Son loves those who become his friends. He no longer regards them as enemies. He does not drive them from his presence.

He draws them to himself. He makes a covenant with them. He shares communion with them.

They become part of his fellowship. They enter the circle of his family. The great blessing that Jesus offers to those who are his friends is the blessing of knowing that we are loved by him in the same way that he is loved by the Father.

Furthermore, he offers to those who become his friends the possibility of living a life that is fruitful. How many people in our day are driven to the wall with a sense of the utter uselessness, pointlessness, purposelessness of the life that they live? It's not life, it's a mere existence, and they are driven to discouragement, depression, and even desperation. But Jesus says, if you are a friend of mine and you identify with my purposes in the world and you are willing to serve and to serve with a willing heart, you will bear fruit and you will experience joy.

Not the kind of shallow, superficial joy that the world gives, but the kind of joy that lasts because you know that you are right with God, you have identified with the purposes of God, you have given yourself to something greater than yourself, and in this you are fruitful and for this you experience joy. Again he says, I don't call you servants anymore because a servant doesn't know his master's business. A servant is told to do this or not do that and he must conform, period.

But he says, I now call you my friends. I take you into my confidence. I explain to you not only the commands that I give but the reasons why it's in your highest and best interests to follow this course of action rather than another.

I tell you what you can become. I tell you what your destiny is beyond the dust of the grave. I take you into my confidence and I explain things to you eye to eye, mouth to mouth, friend to friend, heart to heart.

I no longer treat you as slaves who do as they are told without a word of explanation. You are part of my inner circle. I take you into my confidence.

I reveal God's truth and God's way to you so that you understand what the world can never grasp. John Wesley has enriched us with a voluminous journal of his very eventful life. He's a man who preached more than 40,000 times in his lifetime besides training lay preachers and organizing converts and establishing churches.

It's amazing what God can do with someone who is totally surrendered to him. And in his journals, he's got all kinds of things which are amusing or moving by turns. On one occasion, Wesley happened to be preaching and the town drunk wandered in and began to disrupt the meeting and the fellow who had provided the music for the hymn singing had a trumpet at hand, used it to clobber the fellow into submission and Wesley went right on preaching.

Well, in another part of his journals, he tells of two lay preachers whom he was training and one of them had a very serious problem. He simply could not manage money. His expenditures were much higher than his limited income.

And the other lay preacher, according to Wesley's journals, said to him, let us cooperate. You put your pay into the common fund. I will put my pay into that.

We will both discipline ourselves and meet all our expenses and from what we save, we will begin to repay your debt. That other lay preacher didn't have to give up what he had for the benefit of the one who had nothing, but he pooled his resources with the man who was in debt in order to lift him out of it. What a pale picture of what Jesus, the Lord of glory, did.

Jesus, friend of sinners, who seeing us indebted to God with a debt that we could never discharge, who saw us crushed by a penalty that would be exacted which we could never pay, joined his assets with our liabilities and by the discipline that brought him to the obedience unto the death of the cross, made up for our lack, paid our debt, and set us free. Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends. It's not merely a pooling of material resources which would involve some form of sacrifice, but the giving of life to cover the situation of those who deserved only death.

The truth of the matter is that God demonstrated his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, ignoring God, opposed to God, Christ died for our sins. Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends.

One of the great missionary pioneers who brought the gospel to the New Hebrides was a man by the name of John G. Payton. And no sooner had Payton gotten to those savage islands which were the target of his missionary outreach, than his young bride took sick and died. Within three months of landing on those islands, John Payton was widowed.

And he is left behind this testimonial to Jesus, friend of sinners. He says, If it had not been for Christ and the friendship he gave me, I should have gone mad and died beside that lonely grave. And this very sentiment is echoed by one of the greatest Baptist preachers of the last century, Alexander McLaren, who spent many years in Manchester.

He said, How can I be solitary if Jesus Christ is my friend? Why should I fear if he walks by my side? What is there in life that cannot be faced? What is there in life that cannot be conquered if we have him for the friend of our hearts? He invites us to be his friends, and he offers us inestimable blessings if we become his friends. One thing more, Jesus expects his friends to obey his commandments. That is the evidence of whether or not we are his friends or his foes.

Now there are many hymns, especially of the lighter so-called gospel variety, that have been written about Jesus as our friend. We sang one of these gospel hymns by Wilbur Chapman tonight, Jesus, What a Friend for Sinners. We sometimes sing the hymn written by an Irish immigrant to the province of Ontario who went through a great many troubles and wrote, What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear.

Or, Friendship with Jesus, fellowship divine, O what blessed sweet communion, Jesus is a friend of mine. Or that other which Salvation Army bands love to beat out, I have found a friend in Jesus, thus he is everything to me, he's the fairest of ten thousand to my soul, the lily of the valley, in him alone I see, all I need to cleanse and make me fully whole. And it's great to sing hymns about the eternal Christ, in all his majesty, as our friend.

But it takes more than singing, it demands obedience. You are my friend, says Jesus, if you do what I command. We will continue and remain in a loving relationship with him, we will give evidence of being numbered among his friends and not arrayed among his foes, if we obey his commands.

It's as simple, it's as down to earth, it's as totally demanding as that. To obey him, as he obeyed the Father, that's the condition. How did he obey the Father? The Apostle Paul telescopes the passion narratives of the 18th and 19th chapters of the Gospel of John into two or three simple sentences.

When he says he became a servant and was humbled and became obedient, obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. That is the extent to which Jesus was willing to go to obey his Father. To what extent are you and I willing to go to obey Jesus and to demonstrate that we really are his friends? And lest we think that the command to obey is too general and too vague, he becomes extremely and painfully specific.

This is my commandment, in case you're wondering, that you love each other. Within that early group of apostles, you had a tremendous diversity. And the diversity of the body of Christ has only grown with every passing century and with the conversion of men and women of every tribe and tongue and kindred and people on the face of the earth.

The variety is tremendous. You've got young and old, male and female, rich and poor, learned and uncultured. You've got people of red and yellow, black and white.

You've got people who are urbane and people who are rural. You've got people who by temperament are gung-ho, and you have others who hold back and are rather timid. You've got people of tremendous variety and diversity within the Church of Jesus Christ.

And our Lord knows that the only thing that can hold the Church together, humanly speaking, is that we love one another, that we accept one another, that we listen to one another, that we try to understand one another, that we are willing to forgive one another, that we are willing to put our hand to the plow together. The diversity of the Church is the ruination of the Church unless it is brought to unity and experiences community when we carry out the command of our friend that we love one another. Obedience is the evidence of being truly numbered among His friends.

Thank God for Jesus, friend of sinners. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we realize that as You loved the Son, so Your Son has loved us, unworthy as we are.

Help us out of deep gratitude for the privilege which is ours of being numbered among the friends of Jesus to love Him in return and to show the sincerity of our love by obedience to His will, loving one another as He first loved us. We thank You for the amazing grace that reached out and reached down to touch our lives and lift us up to where Jesus is. In His name, Amen.

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