**MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM**

**PART IX**

**THE SATISFYING INTIMACY OF FRIENDSHIP**

**John 15:12-15**

**INTRODUCTION**

Please open your Bibles to John 15. Today we continue our series on gender and sexuality called “Male and Female He Created Them”. This is Part IX of our series, and it will be the second-last message in this series before we wrap it up next Sunday.

Throughout this series, we’ve tried to look to the Scriptures to answer some “big picture” questions about gender and sexuality. Today I want to get a little more practical and look at the topic of friendship. You may be wondering what friendship has to do with gender and sexuality. In my opinion, a biblical understanding of friendship is one of the most important things churches can teach to address the growing prevalence of homosexuality and transgenderism.

LGBTQ activists and supporters regularly say that we doom those who experience same-sex attraction to a life without meaning and intimacy if we say that they cannot have sexual relationships. A biblical *understanding* of friendship will show the error in that thinking, and a biblical *practice* of friendship will be one of the greatest ways we can fill the human need for meaning and intimacy completely apart from sexual relationships.

We all need meaning and intimacy, but that need is much greater for those who meet three criteria: (1) they experience same-sex attraction; (2) they do not experience opposite-sex attraction; and (3) they believe that homosexuality is contrary to God’s will. For this group of precious people, marriage is not an option. Sexual intimacy is not an option. Their only option is life-long celibacy.

Sam Allberry, an Anglican pastor who fits all three categories and has counselled many who do as well, helps us understand how painful this can be:

“I think of one Christian brother who often finds himself run down due to overwork, but says he overworks because it is just too painful to think about having to spend time off by himself…

“For others the difficulty is the experience of coming back home each day to an empty house. Not being the main person in someone else’s life or having someone who will be thinking of you in a special way. As I heard one Christian sister say, ‘I just want to be first for someone!’” (p. 55)

If you’re single, you can probably relate to this. You just “want to be first for someone”. You want to have people to “do nothing with”. There may even be some who are married who can relate. The experience of loneliness and isolation isn’t just the struggle of single, celibate, same-sex attracted Christians. It’s the experience of many who are missing meaningful, intimate relationships in their lives.

Today in John 15, we’re going to see how Jesus’ teaching about friendship shows us that friendship can provide the meaningful, intimate relationships that all people need. And we will see that restoring a biblical view of friendship is one of the key building blocks to addressing our culture’s changing views on gender and sexuality.

**Read John 15:12-15**

I have titled this message **The Satisfying Intimacy of Friendship**. We’re going to look at three things today. Each of these three things is what I call a cultural “myth” about friendship. They’re things our culture believes about friendship that are false. And as we will see, our text today shows us just how wrong we are about each of these myths. They are:

1. Myth #1: Friendship is Natural
2. Myth #2: Friendship is Deficient
3. Myth #3: Friendship is Easy

(1) **MYTH #1: FRIENDSHIP IS NATURAL**

Our text today comes in the middle of what has become known as Jesus’ “farewell discourse”. Jesus is about to go to the cross, and in order to prepare his disciples for his imminent death, he gives them one final block of teaching in Chapters 13-16, then ends by praying for his disciples in Chapter 17 in the famous “high priestly prayer”.

One of the main themes of Jesus’ farewell discourse is what the disciples’ relationship to Jesus will look like once he is gone. Up to this point, their relationship to Jesus was characterized by the day-to-day routine of travelling with him, eating with him, ministering to others with him, and learning from him. The disciples loved him by following him and being with him. But now that he’s about to leave them, what will it look like for them to love Jesus? How do they continue their relationship with him?

Jesus says two things about their relationship with him and his relationship with them following his death:

* The first is that loving Jesus means obeying his commands: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). “Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me.” (John 14:21). Loving Jesus means obeying Jesus.
* The second is that, for the disciples to abide in Jesus’ love for them – that is, to continue to enjoy Jesus’ love – once again, their lives must be characterized by *obedience* to Jesus. “Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.” (John 15:9-10).

Obedience is the characteristic of those who love Jesus and are loved by Jesus. If we love Jesus, we will obey, and if we are to continually experience Jesus’ love, we will obey.

But what precisely are we to obey? The obvious answer is that we are to obey all that Jesus commands us. But Jesus helps us here by focusing on one thing, and that leads to our text today in 15:12: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” This is the command we are to obey if we love Jesus and want to abide in his love: we are to love “one another” as Jesus has loved us.

Who is this “one another”? It’s not just people in general. Yes, we are commanded to love all people in Jesus’ command to love your neighbor as yourself. But this command is a little different. It’s directed *to* Jesus’ disciples and *for* Jesus’ disciples. Jesus is telling his disciples to love their fellow disciples.

Most of us are well familiar with Jesus’ command that we love other Christians. We talk about loving one another all the time. What we fail to do, however, is to understand this command in the context of *friendship*. Some of us have come to believe that, though we are called to love one another, we are not called to be friends with one another. “Love” has taken on a mystical, religious quality in which it is reserved for spiritual obligations. “Friendship”, however, is for the day-to-day grind of life, those we call when we’re lonely, or when we want to share exciting news, or when we need help – those are our “friends”.

But there is no such distinction between biblical love and friendship. Look at verse 13. Jesus says, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his *friends*.” Follow carefully what Jesus is saying here. He’s saying that we must love one another in verse 12, and now he’s saying that the greatest love is laying down one’s life for your *friends*. The “one another” in verse 12 is the “friends” in verse 13. We are only loving one another as Jesus loved us if those we are loving are our friends.

Our culture says that friendship must be natural, that you can’t *force* a friendship. You either have chemistry with people or you don’t. If you have chemistry, the friendship will just develop on its own, but if you don’t have any chemistry, then there’s no point investing time and energy into that person. Friendship is understood as something that must blossom naturally and organically, and not something that takes effort, planning, and intentionality.

* The sad consequence of this kind of thinking is that many people are simply left without any true friends. They never find chemistry with people. They never just hit it off with people and start spending quality time with them. For a while, they may be interested in meeting new people and getting to know them, but after a time, they simply stop hoping that they will find true friends, and they withdraw into the isolation of their own world.
* For others, they find that they do in fact find chemistry with people, but those people don’t tend to be Christians. Instead, it’s their co-workers, or their classmates, or the neighbours they grew up with. They seem to have more fun with their non-Christian friends. It’s easier to spend time with them, they have more in common, and those friendships just seem to develop and grow naturally.

Jesus’ command in verses 12-13 challenges both groups of people. Jesus *commands* us to be friends with our fellow Christians. Think about that. Jesus says “if you love me, you will obey my command, and my command is that you love your fellow Christians *as friends*.” If friendship with Christians is a command, then friendship is *not* primarily natural. What makes commands “commanding” is that they are obeyed regardless of how one feels, not just when it feels natural.

Of course, we will meet Christians who naturally become friends. Many of us will also have natural friendships with non-Christians. Both are good things. Our text isn’t saying that friendships shouldn’t be natural, or that friendships with non-Christians are wrong. What it *is* saying is that, when you find friendships with believers difficult, that’s no excuse to give up. By God’s grace, we need to keep working at obeying Jesus’ commands, no matter how hard it may be. And that means pursuing friendships in the church no matter how natural or unnatural it may feel.

We could spend a lot of time talking about how this applies in general, but I want to focus on two ways in which this applies to the issue of gender and sexuality.

* First, it challenges believers to intentionally pursue friendship with fellow believers who experience same-sex attraction. It’s not hard to imagine how *unnatural* it may feel for a Christian man to pursue a friendship with another Christian man who is attracted to men. But however unnatural it may feel, it is no excuse to just give up. If loving one another as friends is a command, then pursuing friendship with believers who experience same-sex attraction is our collective responsibility. It takes time. It takes effort. It may even cause hardship. But if we love Jesus, and desire to abide in his love, then building such friendships is already worth it. As we pursue these relationships, I know that we will also find that, as we build friendships with same-sex attracted brothers and sisters, we will find that those friendships also have immense value *in themselves*, and not just in how they enrich our relationship with Jesus. Same-sex attracted Christians have so much to give, so much to teach us, and so much to add to the richness of Christian community.
* Second, it challenges believers who experience same-sex attraction to not give up on meaningful, intimate friendships in the church. It can be so easy to say, “These people aren’t like me. They’ll never understand me. I’ll never really be friends with them.” That’s the kind of thinking that leads people to begin exploring the LGBTQ community. They think that they will only find the relational intimacy they crave with those who share their sexual orientation. Our text today says, “Don’t give up! If you love Jesus, you will love his people, and in loving his people, you will abide in his love.” There is *richness* in loving believers that cannot be found anywhere else. It may be difficult at first. It may even seem impossible. But if you would commit to pursuing friendships with Christians, and Christians would commit to pursuing a friendship with you, you will find the intimacy that you crave.

(2) **MYTH #2: FRIENDSHIP IS DEFICIENT**

Many people believe, however, that apart from sexual intimacy, you can never find the intimacy that you crave. Friendship may be great, but it’s no substitute for true love. This leads to myth #2: that friendship is deficient.

Friendship is one of the most precious gifts that God has given to humanity. It is one of the most meaningful experiences of men and women everywhere. And yet, in our culture, and even in our churches, friendship is tragically devalued. Many see friendship as a temporary stop-gap, a waiting period until true relational intimacy can be experienced in marriage. Yes, it provides some measure of relational intimacy, but it is a deficient sort of intimacy, a mere shadow of the ultimate intimacy one can only experience in a sexual relationship. “Falling in love” and expressing that love through sex is seen as Plan A, but until that happens, people will restlessly tolerate the Plan B of friendship.

This kind of thinking is one of the main reasons why members of the LGBTQ community are so offended when Christians say that they can never marry someone of the same-sex. They interpret it as saying that we’re denying them the deepest of relationships. Friendship seems to be an insufficient consolation prize when they feel like they’ve been denied the greatest of loves.

But is sexual intimacy the greatest of loves? Is it where we experience the deepest bonds of relational intimacy? Verse 13 says “no”: “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” Marriage is not the context for where the greatest love is expressed and received. Friendship is! There is no love greater than the love that can be shown between friends. The greatest love is not the love between a husband and wife, and it is not the love between same-sex lovers. “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

When I was doing my undergrad at McMaster University before Nina and I were married, I had two male friends I was very close to. The three of us lived together in my third year, and then lived together again in my last year along with five other guys. Although all seven of us were friends, the original two guys and I were the closest. We would cook together, eat together, and spend hours in each other’s rooms talking. We would often pull out a guitar and sing worship songs together. I shared a room with one of these friends, and every night we would pray together before going to bed.

I’m married now and enjoy a close friendship with Nina. I can say that she is the best friend I’ve ever had. And yet, I can’t say that my relationship with Nina is just my relationship with my two university friends multiplied by ten. I wouldn’t even say that it is friendship multiplied by two. I miss my friends, and I miss our friendship. Our marriage is not just a better version of my friendships. And yet most people believe that marriage is merely a more intense, more fulfilling, form of friendship.

In their groundbreaking essay, “*What is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense*”, a group of pre-eminent legal philosophers help us understand how we got to this understanding of marriage. In this influential book, the writers give a secular defense for a traditional definition of marriage as being between one man and one woman. The most well-known of the three authors, Dr. Robert George, is the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University and a visiting professor at Harvard Law School. He is so well-respected that his writings were part of the curriculum in my legal philosophy class in law school. The book is quite complex, and though I have read it, I could read it a hundred times more and still see new connections in their argument.

One of their many important insights is that they point out the different way that advocates of same-sex marriage define marriage compared to defenders of traditional marriage. The defenders say that, across cultures and across history, marriage has always been distinct from other relationships because of the *comprehensiveness of the union* between two people. What makes marriage “marriage” is the comprehensive joining of the entirety of two lives towards common ends to an extent not experienced in any other relationships: their work and material goods for their common livelihood, their minds towards the accomplishing of common goals, and their bodies towards the bearing and raising of children. Taking this as the definition of marriage, they conclude that marriage must be between one man and one woman, because only one man and one woman can achieve this kind of comprehensive union.

In contrast, a same-sex couple cannot obtain the comprehensive union required by marriage, because they are unable to join physically in an organic union towards the common end of raising children. Therefore, advocates of same-sex marriage have no choice but to distinguish marriage from other relationships in a different way, not by its comprehensive union, but by something else. And what they chose was *emotional intensity*. This view says that what makes a marriage relationship different from others is its emotional intensity. And since same-sex couples share the same emotional intensity with one another as any other couple, they also should be permitted to marry.

This has become the most common understanding of what marriage is. Marriage has become distinguished not by its comprehensive union, but by its emotional intensity. In this way, our culture’s acceptance of same-sex marriage has completely changed the way we view marriage as a whole. Accepting same-sex marriage was not just giving same-sex couples the same rights heterosexual couples enjoy. Accepting same-sex marriage completely changed the way in which many of us understand what marriage is.

This view of marriage as distinct because of its emotional intensity is the source of so much harm in our world. It’s the reason why people, including many Christians, see marriage as the thing that will bring ultimate satisfaction to their lives, a burden that no human being can bear. The belief that your spouse can bring you ultimate satisfaction as the source of the highest degree of emotional intensity in life is the reason why so many marriages, even Christian marriages, end in divorce. If the foundation of the marriage is emotional intensity, then once the emotional intensity fades, or if a third party brings a greater emotional intensity to one of the spouses, there is no longer any reason for the marriage to continue.

But the other sad consequence of this understanding of marriage is that it erodes the value of friendship. It says that friendships can never give you the relational intimacy and the emotional intensity of a marriage. Friendships may provide some temporary relief to your desire for companionship, but in the end it is only a pale shadow compared to the majesty of marriage. This kind of thinking can lead only to a profound sense of restlessness and loss for any single person.

Jesus says that “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” Marriage does not hold out a depth of love that we cannot experience anywhere else. The greatest love that can ever be experienced can in fact be found in friendship.

If you’re single today and longing to be married, I urge you not to devalue the intimacy and satisfaction of the friendships you currently enjoy. It may be that the Lord has marriage planned for you in the future, but it may also be that the Lord does not plan for you to be married. You need to believe that that’s ok. Marriage does not take you to a higher plane of existence or a deeper sense of fulfillment. The love between spouses is great, but it is not the only place where you can find the greatest of loves. The love between friends can be just as satisfying as the love between a husband and wife.

(3) **MYTH #3: FRIENDSHIP IS EASY**

That’s not to say that *any* kind of friendship demonstrates the greatest of loves. Jesus doesn’t say “Greater love has no one than this, that someone *should have a friend*.” He says, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone *should* *lay down his life for his friends*.” The greatest love is not found in the fact that we have friends. The greatest love is found in what true friends *do for one another*. This leads to the last myth: that friendship is easy.

Our culture generally depicts friendship in terms of mutual benefit. We understand that friendship requires us to offer part of ourselves, but we also expect that our friends will offer us something in return. It could be the mutual benefit of enjoying a hobby together. It could be the mutual benefit of keeping each other company when one is lonely. Friendship, according to our culture, must be a reciprocal relationship.

When the reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship breaks down, that is typically when a friendship ends. Most of us have likely had the experience of having a difficult friend, the person who always seems to need help, comfort, and company. We always seem to be pouring into them and not the other way around, and it seems like the more we pour, the more they need. Eventually, this kind of friendship tends to end, because it has lost its reciprocity. It becomes too hard for us, and though we are willing to tolerate a certain level of hardship in friendship, our ultimate expectation for friendship is that, over the long haul, it should be an easy relationship.

The one category of relationships we are willing to make an exception for is usually family relationships. With family, we understand that we are bound together even if the other person doesn’t give back. “Blood is thicker than water”, as the saying goes. We are willing to maintain and strengthen relationships with family members no matter how difficult it may be.

Jesus revolutionizes the way that we should think about friendship with believers in verse 15: “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.” What’s Jesus saying here? He’s saying that the relationship between Jesus and his disciples has been fundamentally changed. They used to be his servants. Now they are his friends. And what is it that makes them friends? It’s the fact that all Jesus has heard from his Father, he has made known to them.

The implications of verse 15 are stunning. It means that Jesus’ disciples have been welcomed into the intimate relationship between the Father and the Son. They have become part of the family of the God-head. There are no secrets between the Father and the Son that are kept from the disciples. The disciples are now welcomed into the knowledge of the entirety of the divine communication between the Father and the Son, because in Christ, they have both become sons and daughters of the Father, and in Christ, they have become brothers and sisters of the Son.

Therefore, in the church, there is no longer a clear distinction between friends and family. In a sense, we are to love our Christian friends as we love our family members. We still have primary responsibility for our family members. I am called to care for my wife and children to a further extent than I am called to care for someone else’s wife and children. But the quality of our love for fellow believers has more similarities than differences in relation to the quality of our love for family.

And the most significant way that it changes the way we relate to our Christian friends is that the expectation of reciprocity is removed. We don’t abandon one another just because we don’t receive a benefit from the other person. We stick with one another, even when it feels like there’s no personal benefit to the relationship.

That’s what Jesus did for us. “Greater love has no one than this, that someone should lay down his life for his friends.” Jesus gave us more and more before we ever gave him anything, and he didn’t stop giving until he gave us his very life. He came to the world for us, he lived a perfect life for us, he carried our cross for us, and he died on that cross for us. He took the debt that we owed to God because of our sin and paid it on our behalf so that we could be forgiven. He took the death that we deserved because of our sin and died on our behalf so that we could have eternal life. And he did all this without any requirement that we ever pay him back.

What about verse 14? Jesus says, “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” Some might say that Jesus is expecting us to pay him back. He’s saying “my friendship for your obedience.” That’s the exchange, some might say. But that’s not what Jesus is saying. He isn’t saying that the *condition* of becoming his friend is obedience. He’s saying that the *characteristic* of his friends is obedience. We don’t obey *in order* to be his friends. We obey *because* we are his friends. We could never earn the benefit of his sacrificial death for the forgiveness of our sins, no matter how much we obeyed him. Jesus died for his friends, and his friends are known by their obedience to him.

In laying down his life for us, Jesus shows us how we are to love our fellow believers as friends. In verse 12, he said “love one another as I have loved you.” Just as Jesus laid down his life for us, expecting nothing in return, so we are to lay down our lives for one another, expecting nothing in return. There is no greater love than this. We are to love one another like family, committed to one another for the long haul, pursuing the good of one another even at the expense of our own.

In his book *Spiritual Friendship*, Wesley Hill, a bible professor who has struggled with same-sex attraction all his life, writes movingly about his friendship with a married couple he became extremely close to. They had made plans to move in together, along with a few other friends, as they pursued their vision of shared Christian community. But then the husband received a job offer that would require a cross-country move. Taking the job would be good for his career and for his family’s financial situation. From the world’s perspective, it made a lot of sense to take it. After taking some time to think, to seek counsel, and to pray, the couple called Wes with their decision: “We’re staying”, they told him. They stayed because they loved Wes. They stayed because they wanted to care for him as a single, celibate, and same-sex attracted brother.

That’s the kind of friendship we are to have with our fellow believers: to love them like family, and to love them sacrificially. It’s the kind of friendship that stays together even when it makes so much sense not to. And it is these kinds of friendships that we can offer to those who don’t have families of their own, including those who are same-sex attracted.

This understanding of friendship has the potential to radically change how we pursue and build our friendships with one another. We could spend a long time thinking about this, but let me just suggest one application. One of the reasons why many spouses become best friends is the fact that they live together. When two people live together, their lives become so intertwined that the opportunities to lay down their lives for one another are multiplied. Spouses love one another so much because they have shown the greatest love to one another so many times as they have pursued the good of the other over and above their own.

And so I wonder, why can’t others live together? Single men with single men, single women with single women, singles with married couples, or even married couples with married couples. If believers are our family, why is this so strange? Sure, it would be hard at times, and it would require a lot of wisdom to make it work. But if we do it to obey Jesus’ command to love one another as he loved us when he laid his life down for us, then it’s all worth it.

**CONCLUSION**

Biblical friendship is one of the most important things we need in a culture that has become obsessed with sexuality. We need to show the world that, though sexuality is a gift, it is not a greater gift than friendship. Real, satisfying intimacy can be found in non-sexual relationships. The greatest love we could ever experience can be experienced among friends.

And so, by the grace of God, let us pursue this kind of friendship, the friendship that says “I’ll do anything for your good”; the friendship that says “I put your needs above my own”; and the friendship that says “I love you not because of what you do for me, but because of who you are – my brother, my sister, in Christ.” If we would have these kinds of friendships, we could not make a stronger statement to the world, and to ourselves, that Jesus – not marriage, and not sex – has satisfied our deepest desires.