

Whole-Life Formation in the Jesus Way

October/November 2018 Resource

Spiritual Friendship

“Friendliness is common currency today. We are told to ‘Fly the friendly skies.’ User-friendly software always helps. Seeker-friendly churches make everyone feel welcome... Friendliness doesn’t require loyalties or major investments of time and energy. Friendliness may grease the wheels of human interaction, but it is not the same thing as friendship. Friends are not a dime a dozen. They are not the same thing as allies, colleagues, neighbors, relatives, and acquaintances. Friends require a degree of intentionality and self-donating love that goes beyond friendliness and supporting each other in some act or enterprise. Friends know our being as well as our doing.”

[Adele Calhoun]

The example of Jesus

Jesus modeled spiritual friendship for us. He lived his life in community. He had twelve chosen companions that he did life with. But among the twelve, Jesus had three close friends: Peter, James, and John.

Jesus chose to share with these three his high points, like the transfiguration.

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.

[Matthew 17:1-3]

He also chose to share his low points with them, like Gethsemane.

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

[Matthew 26:36]

He could have experienced these events alone, but chose instead to invite others in on his life. He shared with them both his joys and sorrows.

Our tendency to hide and isolate ourselves

It is easy to live isolated and individualized lives in a city like Miami. The pace of life is quick and the demands on our time never end. If we aren’t intentional we’ll wake up one day and realize that no one really knows what’s going on inside of us.

We also have a tendency to hide what’s really going on from others. The most common phrase to hear in Christian settings is “I’m doing fine!” We keep others at an arms distance and have a very difficult time being vulnerable and appearing weak. When we live this way, we sabotage ourselves from experiencing the power of God in the midst of our weakness.

Spiritual friendship keeps us living life with other people who know us deeply and love us faithfully. These vulnerable relationships keep us living in the light of God. Vulnerability can be painful at times, but the beauty that comes is always worth it.

Jesus' desire and dream is for us to experience his abundant freedom and life - for us to live in his Father's available kingdom of healing, hope, and love. Jesus wants us to taste his fruit - intimacy with God, self-awareness, joy, discernment between truth and lies, and deep inner peace.

Community is part of how we experience this abundant life and freedom. In the context of authentic relationships with others we begin to come out of hiding and receive our identity as sons and daughters of God.

Spiritual Friendship 101

On the most basic level, a spiritual friend is someone that you talk to about your spiritual life. You share with each other how you're experiencing God, what you're learning from him, and how you're living out the mission and the calling he has on your life.

But there are other elements of spiritual friendship that are worth highlighting.

Encouragement [*1 Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 10:24*]

Encouragement is an indispensable part of spiritual friendship. There is so much in life that beats us down and discourages us that we need a steady dose of encouragement. We all need a friend who is absolutely convinced that we are great and can do great things. We need someone who will cheer us on when we succeed and pull us up when we fail.

The most powerful words you can say to a person are **"I believe in you."** Say it to Jesus and he'll transform *your* life. Say it to a friend and you'll transform *their* life.

Accountability [*Ephesians 4:22-25; Colossians 3:16*]

We often think of accountability as a negative thing, but in reality it is an **expression of love**. To hold each other accountable is to hold each other in high regard and high expectation.

And accountability is **necessary for real growth**. Paul is clear in Ephesians 4 that putting off the old self and putting on the new requires we "speak truthfully" to one another.

Who has VIP access to your heart? All-access backstage pass to your heart, so they can ask you about anything in your life – your marriage, your thought life, what you're looking at online, how you're treating your kids, how you're using your money.

If we're going to become the people that God created us to be then we need to "admonish one another in all wisdom." To admonish means to warn, to watch out, and to offer guidance to another.

Prayer [*James 5:16; Galatians 6:2*]

We all need someone that we can be vulnerable with – someone that we can be honest with about our struggles, temptations, and needs.

A lot of us associate confession with the Catholic church and going to a priest for confessional. But notice that James doesn't say to go to the priest or the pastor or even the elders of the church. He says confess and pray "with one another." This is addressed to everyone in the church.

Sin wants to remain in the dark, because that's how it festers. But when we share our struggles with someone else we bring that sin into the light so it can begin to be dealt with.

But this is more than just therapy. We then bring each other's struggles and needs before the Lord in prayer.

Prayer is a labor of love. It's a way of standing with someone in their struggle or need, bearing their burden, and pushing for God's will to be accomplished in a person's life.

Spiritual Friendship Guide

A spiritual friend is someone that you regularly talk to about your spiritual life and share both your joys and sorrows. This friendship is built on mutual encouragement, accountability, and praying for each other.

Finding a Spiritual Friend

If you do not already have a spiritual friend, pray and ask God to show you who this person should be. Then look for someone that also wants to grow in God. It would be great if this person is in your Missional Church, but another person may come to your mind. It could be your spouse, but this is not recommended. It is better to ask a good friend or someone of the same gender that you sense is eager to grow in their spiritual life.

It is important that you find someone that you feel safe with. You'll be getting vulnerable with this person so you need to make sure you can trust them to not betray a confidence. Also, if you sense that this person might judge you or react to what you say in an unloving way, then choose someone else.

Once you have chosen this person, ask if the two of you can get together to share about your spiritual lives and encourage each other.

Share

When you meet, give each other time to answer the following questions:

1. How is your life with God?
2. In what ways do you need to be encouraged right now?
3. What, if anything, is holding you back from living more fully for God?

Listen

We live in an age of much talking but little listening. So make an effort to listen well and allow the other person to share what they're really thinking and feeling. People long to know and be known, and when they feel safe they will usually share a great deal.

That being said, be careful about what and how much you share. Unless you have a long-standing relationship and have done this kind of thing with this person, you cannot be sure of their reaction. A good rule of thumb is to share only what you think the person can handle as you are "testing the waters" of spiritual friendship.

Pray

Be sure to take some time to pray for one another after you each have shared. Simply lift the person up to the Lord, thank him for what he's doing in their life, and ask him to meet them in whatever struggle or need they have shared.

Peace

Above all, be at peace. If this is the first time you are doing something like this, do not enter into it with a great deal of worry and concern. This exercise is designed to be a gift, not a burden. Approach it with an attitude of joyful expectancy.

If this was a fruitful experience for you, consider meeting with this person regularly to share and build each other up. Decide how often you will meet together. At least once a month is recommended.