

The Tale of Two Men

1 Peter 4:7-11

Ray Anderson --- November 7, 2021

Good morning, people of Grace! One of the things that we want to do today—over the last several weeks we’ve been giving you an update on our Summer to Give and where we were, where things were falling, who we were giving to, and that sort of stuff. And it was fun for me as I was putting together these numbers for Matt, and we’ve been talking about it for a couple of weeks. I said, “Matt, I need to show you something.” I said, “Let’s go back to when the pandemic started and last summer.” In the summer of 2020 we just saw that you as a church were giving incredibly well, and we expected during those summer months for the giving to go down and it actually increased for us the first five months of the pandemic. And so, we said, “Let’s give this money away.” And so, we began to give money to community organizations. And by the end of last summer into the fall we had given away \$251,000 to our community. That went to things like Central Texas Food Bank for those who had experienced unemployment, Austin Disaster Relief Network and their great work in the city. We wrote 2,400 cards and put a \$30 gift card in to give to 1,200 health care workers at St. David’s Hospital, and then again at Seton Hospital. We gave money to what was called the Cares Fund, a relief fund that was set up among the churches in Austin so that we could help those churches that were experiencing more of the economic distress and downturn from the pandemic. And we gave to that, and we gave to Mission Possible, the God of Hope prison ministry, Cops for Charity, Mosaic Street Ministry—all kinds of different things last year.

And so, this spring when Matt and I were talking through the preaching calendar and we were talking about this 1 Peter series, he was coming up on Chapter 2 where it talks about “Let those outside the church” --- let the people around you —“See your good works and marvel that God would do this through you.” And so, we started about what we could do to express that. And so, what we proposed was the Summer to Give and the Fall to Serve. And Summer to Give, we said that everything that came in excess from May through September, we would, again, give to the community and support local groups that were helping people in our community and around the world in particular crisis.

So, in the spring we immediately gave \$217,000 to The Source and to Community First Village to support them building four of their tiny homes. We've done a visit over there; it's fun to see what they're doing.

Then in the course of the summer, we added to that \$282,000. We gave to Community First Village again and ADRN for their new headquarters, to Haiti Baptist Mission, English Language Ambassadors, Education Connect, the Restoration Arts Center, which is a part of Mission Possible that does neat work with kids in Pflugerville, Mission Possible, and God of Hope ministry. And we've just sponsored a very unique thing. We had the opportunity to sponsor for the Austin Police Association. They're coming up on their holiday dinners over the next month or so, and they do a special dinner at each of the substations. We're going to sponsor that meal— isn't that cool?—to say "thank you" for these first responders that are helping our community. It's been a hard year in so many different ways.

And so, out in the lobby, you saw, when you came in, tables with large cards on them. Each one of those is for a different substation. So, if you'd take a spin around that table and just say "thank you" to those officers, then we'll give those at each of those dinners.

So, all of that sum total was \$750,000. Isn't that cool? But like with any infomercial, you have to say, "But there's more ..." So, other funds came in by the end of September that we're working on distributing. So, our grand total since the start of the pandemic to give to our community is one million dollars. Isn't that cool? There's supposed to be ticker tape coming down ... that's a Wheel of Fortune reference if you didn't catch that.

So, we still have money that we're going to distribute, and there's some neat things that we're looking at, some other things supporting some of the families with the police that lost officers this past year, a thing they're doing this spring. There's actually a homeless center that's going to be opening up in northwest Austin to help them navigate the system. So, we're looking at those things develop.

But look—it happened because of us collectively—of you giving generously and then us asking the Lord, "What do we do with this and what's our stewardship of this money?" And then the second wave, the Summer to Give, was to come back to you and say, "Let's do it again—let's do it more. Now we're not going to give just from the excess that we happened to receive; we want you to give generously." And do you know what? You did give---a million dollars in this seventeen months of time that we could give away and support those people in need around

us. And people will come to know Christ; they will be helped; they will be fed, they will be sheltered because we did it together. So, thank you very much. There is much reason for us to enter this Thanksgiving season with a heart of gratitude for what God's doing at Grace Covenant Church. So, thank you.

Let me pray for that, and I'll pray for Matt, too.

Father, I thank You for the generosity You showed us as a church; that You kept us employed and kept us giving and generous, so that we could be generous and turn outward to our community and to other people in need around the world in the distress that's going on. Father, there is nothing like You and there is no one like You who can truly meet the needs of Your people and the needs of the world. And so, we turn to You and we bring ourselves to You and our resources that You so graciously entrusted to us, and we turn outward and give, and give generously. So, I thank You for each person here and their generosity and how that overflowed to impact other people.

I pray for Matt, that You would heal his inner ear, that the treatment he's going through would work, it would do its good course and good objective; that You would restore him to health and take him through this season right now. And I pray this in Your name. Amen.

So, today I want to talk about friends and good friends, actually. And we're going to look at a couple of encounters that Jesus had with a couple of people. And we're going to see three types of friendship, and then I'm going to share with you three characteristics of what I think makes a really good friend in our life. And, certainly, we need to have friends in our lives.

When I was in high school, the high school that I graduated from—I say the one I graduated from, because I went to three different high schools in those years. But the one I graduated from, as part of the yearbook and part of the year, the senior class elected what they called Senior Superlatives. And it's those people that were the most likely to succeed or the most popular or most athletic, or the sweetest or the most likely to end up in jail—you got your pictures in that section of the yearbook and all that stuff.

And I was selected as the friendliest person in our class. Now, I thought it was strange too. And actually, when I heard that, I laughed. I thought maybe it was a consolation because it came in down the list on the most likely to succeed or something. I reveal this not to tout my

friendliness, but for illustrative purposes this morning, okay? Now I laugh because that's not really who I am. I didn't really view myself as a very friendly person. And actually, I came in to be friendly to other people out of absolute necessity in my life. See, all these kids that were in this high school—it was right outside of Atlanta, it was just beginning to be a suburb and community outside of Atlanta at that time—they had all been together since elementary school, kindergarten. And I had moved in my junior year, so I had to meet people. And I met a lot of people, and they met me. People would walk up to me and say, "I heard you moved to town." And I thought, *Why are you talking about me?*

And so, it was in that context. But it was a broader context than that in my life, actually. My dad was in the military, and at the age of twelve, we moved from Atlanta to Japan for two and half years and lived on a military base there. He retired and we moved back to Atlanta. We went through a series of temporary houses. And so, from the time I was ten years old until I graduated from high school, I didn't go to the same school two years in a row. So, you learn to make friends quickly, and you become most friendly to others, because when you do that you make friends quickly, because they're not going to be there very long. Either they're going to move, or you're going to move, or whatever in terms of that.

So, I didn't have long-term friendships. So, in the seventh grade I went to three different schools. Imagine that for that age group. So, I made friends quickly, but I didn't have the sense of stability in relationships. My older sister (six years older) and my brother (ten years younger) and then my parents were as much stability as was there. If I told you about my family, that would be a different sermon.

When I went to college, I remember joining a fraternity at the end of my freshman year. And I remember sitting in my room two years later thinking, *I don't know what to do with these guys because I've never had a friend beyond two years that was still around.* So, I had to learn how to figure out how to have friendships. So that constant change affected the quality of the friendships that I had.

And then there was another factor that affected me in terms of making friends. I'm actually an introvert. You people are exhausting. *[Laughter]* No—I'm an introvert. I recharge my emotional battery and my physical battery, my spiritual battery, by being alone. So, I withdraw naturally from people. It takes emotional energy when I'm around people. But I had to learn to engage with people in terms of doing that.

And, certainly, my profession that I've chosen and that God has called me to demands levels of relational connection with people. So, I consider myself an introvert with social skills. So, there is hope for you introverts that are out there. Now because of the deficit of my background relationally and my bent, in terms of that, I had to learn the value of friendship and how to make friends quickly, how to enjoy friends while I could, and most of my friendships were for a season or for a reason, and then they were gone or I was gone. And because of that, I would have to push myself to be vulnerable, and be vulnerable earlier in a relationship than maybe I was uncomfortable with in that, so that maybe I could connect with someone at more than just the surface level a little bit.

Others of you here are extroverts and you don't even understand what I'm talking about so far, but we'll all get on the same page in just a little bit. You just seem to know people and you know everybody, it seems like, from my perspective. You remember names, you make connections, you remember things about people. You go into a room and you can just see your energy rise because you're getting energy from the relational and social connection. If I put you in a room by yourself, you would wilt like a flower out of a pot. Extroverts, you make friends easily, it seems, and you have a wide circle of that.

Jesus' Encounters with Two Different Men

Well, with this issue of friendship as a backdrop, I want to look at two situations, two encounters, two different men had with the person of Jesus. There are a lot of similarities between the two. Both had some form of debilitating illness that left them immobile. They had a need greater than they could take care of for themselves. They were both healed by Jesus ultimately, and both were demonstrations of God's power to heal someone through His spoken word. He didn't have to touch them—He just spoke to them. Both had their lives changed radically because of this encounter with Jesus.

If you read the full account—and I'm only going to read a partial account—of both of them, you'll see that Jesus had similar interactions with them. He would say things like, "Your sins are forgiven"—"Take up your pallet and walk." They both stirred up similar controversies with the Pharisees and the scribes that were around them that saw this, because, of course, Jesus did this on the Sabbath. The difference is how they came into this encounter with Jesus. So, I

want to use that to talk about friendships and the kind of friends we have and characteristics of a good friends.

John 5:1-10

After these things, there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there in Jerusalem by the Sheep's Gate is a pool which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticos. In these lay the multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, withered, waiting for the movements of the waters. For an angel of the Lord when down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water. Whoever then first after the stirring up of the water stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted. A certain man was there and had been sick for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been a long time in that condition, He said to him, "Do you wish to get well?"

The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up. But while I am coming another steps down before me."

Jesus said, "Arise, take up your pallet and walk." And immediately the man became well and took up his pallet and began to walk. Now it was a Sabbath on that day.

So, let's look at the first man in the New Testament in the Book of John in chapter 5. It says, "After these things, there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem." So He's left Galilee and come to Jerusalem. "Now there in Jerusalem by the Sheep's Gate is a pool which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticos. In these lay the multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, withered, waiting for the movements of the waters. For an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water. Whoever then first after the stirring up of the water stepped in, was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted. A certain man was there"—a particular man was there—"and had been sick for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been a long time in that condition, He said to him, 'Do you wish to get well?'" The sick man answered Him, 'Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up. But while I am coming, another steps down before me.'

“Jesus says, ‘Arise, take up your pallet and walk.’ And immediately the man became well and took up his pallet and began to walk. Now it was a Sabbath on that day.”

So, here’s this man. If you go on one of the trips with us to Israel (and I encourage you to do this), just on the north side of the Temple Mount is where you’ll find the Sheep’s Gate. And right near there you’ll see a church called St. Anne’s Church. And next to Saint Anne’s is where they discovered this Pool of Bethesda. It’s about twenty-five or thirty years ago they uncovered this and kept going down layers, and it is really kind of deep. And the idea is that there are these stairs going down toward this, and these porticos, these arches and columns are there.

So, the sick and those that were ill with illness or were lame or affected by certain infirmities would gather there at Bethesda. And we have a hospital named after it; it’s a place of healing. So, they gathered there, and this particular man had been in his particular condition for thirty-eight years. And Jesus sees him as he’s walking through Jerusalem, and He comes and asks him this most profound and yet very curious question to ask a sick man. “Do you want to get better?” *Well, kind of look around—that’s why I’m here.* “But do you want to get better?”

And notice that the man doesn’t really answer Jesus’ question about desire. He answers it about condition. He says, “I have no man to help me, nobody to put me into the water when it gets stirred.” *See, other people are quicker than I am because of my condition—I’m lame. I can’t get there. I need some help. But I have no one.*

Have you ever been in a situation where you didn’t have the help you need? Or you didn’t have anyone around when you needed help? I remember one time slipping and falling in the bathtub and I cracked a couple of my ribs and was in excruciating pain. And there was nobody at home. Diana was gone. I was alone, but in pain. And so, I had to struggle and get myself out of the tub and dry off and get dressed and then you go to the doctor and he says, “Well, don’t laugh or breathe for the next six weeks and it’ll be better.”

But at that moment when I had a need, there was no one there. There were times when I was traveling early in my career for ministry purposes and I would be gone on five days on a trip somewhere and Diana would be at home with young children, and they would get sick and have fever and runny noses and diarrhea. And she was alone and it was day two on a five-day trip. Being alone is not a pleasant place to be. It’s a hard place to be.

So, this man had no one.

Mark 2:1-5

And when Jesus had come back to Capernaum, the people heard that He had come home. And many were gathered together so that there was no longer room, even near the door. And He was speaking the word to them. And they came bringing Him a paralytic man who was carried by four men. Being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on. Jesus, seeing their faith, said to the paralytic, “My son, your sins are forgiven.”

So, let's flip over to the Book of Mark and look at the second man in Mark chapter 2. It says, “And when Jesus had come back to Capernaum”—Capernaum was a town in Galilee that kind of became His ministry headquarters. It's where Peter and James and John lived, and Peter's house was Jesus' central base when He was in town there. So, He's back in His home town there, and in verse 2 it says, “And many were gathered together so that there was no longer room, even near the door. And He was speaking the Word to them.” So, He's preaching out of this house. “And they came bringing Him a paralytic man who was carried by four men. Being unable to get to Him (Jesus) because of the crowd, they go up on the rooftop, they remove the roof above Him, and when they had dug an opening they let down the pallet on which the paralytic is laying. Jesus, seeing their faith, said to the paralytic, ‘My son, your sins are forgiven.’” And later he's going to take up his pallet and walk and go away.

Now this man couldn't get to Jesus by himself. So, his four men, whether they were friends or relatives—they were certainly people who cared for him—heard about Jesus and brought him to Jesus. Now, it didn't take four men to carry him. It doesn't for a stretcher. You can do it with two. But all of them wanted the experience of bringing their friend; they cared about him enough to do that and to be together. They cared enough to overcome obstacles they met—a crowd. So, they go up on a roof and they tear it up.

Now imagine this scene, the roof being torn up. Now before you think of some thatched hut where they're just removing palm leaves and straw, it was a roof stout enough to hold five men. They tore a hole big enough to put down a pallet with a grown man lying on it. So, they

tear up this roof—I'm sure the whole crowd is noticing things falling from the ceiling and a hole opening and light coming in the room. And I'm sure the homeowner had a few things to say and had an issue to deal with later. But they were going to get their friend in front of Jesus. They were undeterred. They weren't going to wait until the sermon was ended and the crowd dissipated; they wanted to get him to Jesus.

And it's interesting in verse 5, it doesn't say "when He saw his faith"—it says "when He saw their faith." There was something about a compounding of this group of people who cared enough about this man to bring him to Jesus, that Jesus could recognize their faith when He saw it and respond to it. See, good friends, spiritually minded friends, fill in the gap when your faith is weak. Good friends, really close spiritually minded friends, know that they can't fix you on their own. But they know a God who can, who can do miraculous things. Really great spiritually minded friends won't settle for your current state when they know that God has something better for you. Those are really good friends. They know that you wouldn't do any less for them, so they will do it for you.

Do you have friends you'd tear up a roof for? Are there friends that you have who would tear up a roof for you because they wanted to get you to Jesus?

Aristotle's Three Types of Friends

So, we're going to look at—to use as a basis—from Aristotle; he describes three types of friends. One was friends of utility, friends of pleasure, and friends for goodness—or virtuous friends—friends of goodness.

1. Friends of Utility

So, friends of utility ... these are people that we generally have a reason to relate to. It could be that they serve a particular purpose in your life. So, I have a friend that I can call when I need financial advice. I have friends to call if I need a referral to an auto mechanic or a plumber, or whatever, and they'll be glad to share the name of someone they know.

If you go to the same person to have your hair cut, over periods of time you develop a friendship with them, and you may even give Christmas cards to each other and tell them about your families and all those things. But there's an exchange of service there, right? You get your hair cut, they get money. And that's what friends of a utilitarian purpose do. There's usually

something in it for them. They do it for you because they know you'll do it for them at some point in time. So, you can borrow a cup of sugar, you can borrow a weed eater from them if yours is broken. But it doesn't necessarily mean that there's a deep relationship that's going on. And if your style changes and you want to go to someone else for a haircut, that person kind of isn't your friend in the same kind of way. You move to a new neighborhood and you lose those connections and you have new connections. They're friends of utility, for a purpose.

2. Friends for Pleasure

The second group is friends for pleasure. These are usually friends that you socialize with or you play with, that you have a fun time with. They're golf and hunting buddies, they're the folks that you meet at the UT game or the A&M game, and you tailgate with, or you tailgate next to them. You have a relationship—*I'll see you next year when we have another football game*. They're friends of pleasure. For a mom, it might be that playgroup of kids of a similar age that you get together with. And they're friends, and you have a good time with them, and you do events with them, and your kids are around each other and have a pleasant time, but if you were to move out of town, you'd never talk to them again. When that season ends or your interests change, you change friends. They're friends of pleasure. They're great to have, and you want to have friends of utility and friends of pleasure.

And if you think about it, what the pandemic hit us hardest on in terms of relationship, are friends of utility and friends of pleasure. All of a sudden, you couldn't go get your hair cut because the shop was closed, or you just limited your circle of activities and you didn't see some of the people that you were seeing on a regular basis, or there wasn't a football game to even go to, or an event or a concert or something like that. So, what strained us a lot and what our loss was, was with friends of utility and with friends of pleasure.

Most of my friends when I was younger were friends of utility and friends of pleasure, so that when I moved or when I changed schools, I had to make a new set of friends and get engaged with them. And then, when that season was over, we left and I made a new set of friends. So, I learned to be friendly. Yes.

3. Friends for Goodness

But there's a third type of friendship that Aristotle would talk about that is beyond friends of utility and friends of pleasure, and it's called friends for goodness, or virtuous friends is another name for that—friends of goodness. These are our deeper, long-lasting relationships that you develop. These are people that you call first when you find out you're pregnant or you're moving or you got a new job or you got a raise, because you've got to share it with these kinds of friends. They're the ones that you tell and ask to pray for you when you're facing a surgery or a particular illness, maybe with your child or your parents. You'll tell them these things. Or when your marriage is in trouble you'll go to them because you know they care about you. Over time these friends have proven themselves, that they're committed to your well-being. They're friends for goodness. These friends want the best for you regardless if there's something in it for them. Friends that will carry you when you can't walk or they'll tear up a roof for you—whatever it takes for you to get what you need—those are friends of goodness.

I've certainly had friends that have prayed for me in difficult seasons and in hard times, who have given financially to us, generously, when we were supported in ministry. But I also knew I needed to learn to have friends for goodness, friends that would engage in my life. But I had to learn to do that, to engage in those relationships in that way and let them in close enough for me to share what was really going on in my life.

So, there are friends that I have, friends for goodness, that when they ask me “How are you doing?”, I am compelled to tell them the truth. I don't give them a casual answer of “I'm doing fine, working hard, lots going on,” all those things we do in casual conversation with friends of utility and friends of pleasure. I tell them how I'm doing. I tell them where I'm weak and where I'm hurting and the difficult things that we have. Sometimes I surprise myself with being so quickly vulnerable with certain people, because I know I can trust them and they care about me deeply.

Years ago, when I was going through the transition from being on staff with Campus Crusade and the prospect of coming on as pastoral staff, I knew I was going to lose a lot of friends, not because they didn't like me or resented me leaving staff, but because my circle was going to change. Some of them I just wouldn't see; I wouldn't have a reason to talk to them. We lived in different parts of the country, and when I changed jobs, it changed things.

So, I remember going to a men's retreat at Grace, the first one I attended, and praying, "Lord, I need you to help me find friends." So, I came in and prayed and I found someone. We had some things in common, and I said, "Look, I'm forming an accountability group. Would you like to be a part of it?" And they said, "Yes." And I found another person who was really brand new to Grace, and I said, "I'm forming an accountability group. I need men in my life who are close enough to see me." And he joined in and brought another friend with him. We've had different people in that group over time, but there are two other guys, two other men, that I've been in relationship with for twenty-six years. We're involved in each other's lives, we tell the truth to each other because we trust each other. Their investment in me has helped me to be a better man, a better husband for Diana, a better father for my kids, a better pastor for you, a better person. They were friends of goodness. There were times when they saved me from the stupidity of my thinking. I said, "Oh, you know when I just vented and told them what I'd really like to do?" And they'd say, "Okay, glad you got that off your chest, man. Okay, now let's talk about what you're really going to do, because you're not going to that, stupid."

They have pulled me aside—we talk honestly with each other, we've stopped each other from---we know each other well enough that we can say, "Look, here's what your tendency is to do in this situation. Right?"

"Yes, that's what I'm going to do."

"No, you're not. You're going to go in there and say, 'No, you can't do that.' Got it? You're going to report to us later on that."

See, we want to invest and engage in each other's life. We are friends for goodness' sake. We want each other to become like Jesus, to become like Christ in all aspects of our lives. Good friends, friends for goodness—we all need that. They encourage me to obey God and to make good choices.

So, what do you look for in a friend for goodness? Again, it's not all that hard to find friends of utility or friends of pleasure. You go and do activities that you like to do, or you go and do things that you need to do. But friends for goodness—you need to be able to identify and draw them in and cultivate those relationships.

Three Characteristics of a Friend for Goodness

So, as followers of Christ, I would like to propose that there are three characteristics of a good friend for goodness. There are three characteristics I want to encourage you to look for.

1. They Are God Investors

One is that they are God investors. And another way to put that is that they're spiritually minded. They care about the things of God, and they are investing in themselves in relationship to God, and they want to encourage others to do that. These men encourage my faith, they promote my obedience. The paralytic's four friends took him to Jesus. Their combined faith was recognizable to him. They were spiritually minded, and having people around you that are spiritually minded, that care about the things of God, that will promote you to care about the things of God rather than your own selfish interests—those are friends for goodness.

2. They Are Character Developers

A second characteristic I would say is they are character developers. They care more about your character rather than managing your behavior. Sometimes what happens in accountability groups is that we do that to keep us from doing bad things. You keep me on the straight and narrow kind of deal. Well, we need friends beyond just to prevent bad behavior in us; we need friends to help us make good choices, yes, in our behavior and attitude and actions. But we need people to help us become better people—character development. They're not going to settle for you being stagnant or stuck in some area of your life. Those areas of your hurts, habits, and hang-ups—they're going to step in there and say, "Look, you're about to do it again. Let us help you to make that change. Let us help you to trust Jesus to do something in your life that you can't do for yourself. So, we're going to be friends of goodness so that you don't keep experiencing the consequences of your bents and bad habits and character flaws."

3. They Are Truth Tellers

The third thing they are is truth tellers. So, they're God investors, they're character developers, and they're truth tellers--because they know God's truth and they're willing to speak that into your life. You wrestle with Scripture—*What does this passage really mean?*—together,

so you can help apply that in a person's life. And so, they're going to speak truth into your life. They're going to be an appropriate reflection based on your good bends and the sin in your life, and help you to become more like Christ. Listen to the truth tellers in your life. Have truth tellers around you.

Seek Out Friends for Goodness

So, this thing of finding these characteristics of a God investor, a character developer, and a truth teller is important to cultivate friends for goodness. Finding them is important in that, but it's also important for you to be that for other people. So, you learn to be a spiritually minded man or woman, a character developing person, and a truth teller in other people's lives—not just blasting them with truth, but speaking truth in love there, because you care.

Now, I can't guarantee as a pastor that you'd find friends for goodness if you get more involved at Grace. I wish I could. But I do want you to know that's what we do here. That's our desire, to cultivate those kinds of relationships. And if you want a spiritually minded person and person who cares about character and telling the truth, why don't you go to a place where they're gathered—can I say on Sunday morning or midweek? You go to a sporting event to find people that enjoy sports, right? You go to concerts to find people who enjoy this particular artist. You go to church to find people who care about the things of God and want to cultivate that in their life and in your life.

And so, we're a very large church. It is easy to stay anonymous. It is easy now to even stay at home. It's easy to slip in the dark room and slip out before we turn the lights back on at the end. It's easy to do all that. But you won't cultivate relationships by doing that. You have to stay the second hour. You have to get involved in a community where you can find people that are your age group or gender or care about the things that you care about in life, and who are going through a similar life stage, and get connected with them.

And so, I do propose this as a place to start to look for and to find friends of virtue that will encourage that in you, that will speak the truth, and that will correct you appropriately and encourage you when you're weary—friends who will take you to Jesus when you really have a need there.

See, a church is a church of relational connection. When Jesus left us in this world, he left three primary things to help us live in a fallen world with our fallen nature. He left us His Word;

He left us His Spirit, and He left us His body, the community of Christ. And it's in that context when we combine His Word and His Spirit, in the context of relational connection with one another, that we can find people who can take us to Jesus, and we can take to Jesus, and will encourage us to walk with Him and to obey Him.

So, take the opportunities before you. Again, one of the major impacts of the pandemic was its impact on our friends of utility and our friends of pleasure. But see, the pandemic didn't keep me from my friends of goodness. We still met. We still talked, we still kept current. We kept engaged in each other's lives, because a pandemic isn't going to keep us from doing that. There are times we did it online instead of in person over a meal. But we still did it.

And so, the aloneness that you feel, just like that man at the Pool of Bethesda—he wasn't alone. There were lots of people around him. But he felt lonely because he had no man to help him.

So, I would encourage you to take the step that you need to in order to reach out to people to get connected, to show up. Sometimes it's just a matter of showing up. It's staying the extra hour, it's coming on a Wednesday morning or a Wednesday evening, or a Monday morning or a Monday evening, or men's group on Thursday mornings or Thursday evenings. It's taking that step to do that, to connect with others. But you have to initiate that. That's what I learned as I was growing up. If friends didn't just walk into my life, I had to initiate to get them and to see them develop and to grow in that.

Many times, when we hear of someone—this is the church leadership, elders and pastors—of someone going through something very difficult in their life—maybe an illness or a death in the family or something like that—one of our first questions as leadership is *Who are they connected with? Who are they in relationship with already?*—so that we know that there are people around them. Those are going to be the first responders in their life. They'll be the first ones to show up at home with a meal, or in the hospital to pray, or whatever it takes, or signing up for that care calendar. It's those connections that are already made before the event happens. It is sad when we find out that someone is in that situation and going through hard things and they're not connected with anyone here. And then we help people get connected and bring them in. But it's not fun to have nobody around you in those kinds of situations.

So, as I grew up, I had to learn a lot. Not only was I in situations where I had to change schools often, and we moved a lot, and those kind of things like that; I had to learn how to be

friends. I also was an introvert by bent and nature, and still am; but I learned the social skills of how to relate and connect with other people. And I had to be willing to come out of my introvert bent and be vulnerable with other people so that I could have friends for goodness in that.

But I also had another problem when I was little. I was painfully shy---painfully shy. I was easily intimidated around other people. Again, everything was new and all that sort of stuff, and I would hide behind my mom, and she was very extroverted, which made me hide even more in that. So, I can remember consciously—I don't know why I did this, but in seventh grade when I did those three different schools in one year, I decided that I was going to be less shy at each place I went to. Every new place I went to, I would be less shy until I could say I was no longer a shy person. So, I made a choice on my part. So, I would go to this new situation and I would be friendly, and I would make friends quickly—yeah, friends of utility, friends of pleasure—they were going to be gone in a few months because we were moving out of temporary housing to another house. And the next place I would do a little bit more, and a little bit more, and a little bit more, until as a graduating senior, I was voted the friendliest. But it's choices I had to make along the way to engage. It is very easy to make all the choices necessary for you to stay isolated and alone. It is very hard—and especially if you're shy or you're introverted or your circles are small—you have to break out of those circles to try to connect. And when you do that, I want to encourage you to connect with people who care about God and care about you knowing God, and will not just be more friends of utility and friends of pleasure, but they will be friends of goodness in your life, that no pandemic can keep them away from you. No pandemic is going to keep them from bringing you to Jesus and encouraging your growth in Him.

Let's pray.

Father, what a great God you are. You are a God who loves us and You are a God of relationships. Your character is that You love people and You care about people deeply, so much so that You would leave Your throne in heaven and come and intervene in our history in order to be our Savior and to bring us into relationship, to show us what it meant to have a relationship with the living God.

So, Father, we entrust ourselves to You, and we'd ask that You would give us people, a community that will promote our goodness and our obedience to You and to Your Word. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.