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WHO IS THE TRUE FRIEND?

Lukan Friendship as Paradigm for the Church

By Rollin Ramsaran

As in New Testament times, so also today Christian communities consist of people who are infused with relationships. Then, as well as now, the key question was the *truth and quality* of those relationships as proven by their grounding in the very character of God. In our time, both within and outside the church, people long for a true sense of belonging, purpose, and happiness that overcomes the sense of fragmentation, isolation, chaos, and loss of control often connected with modern life. Luke's Gospel reminds seeking disciples that the social and religious convention of friendship leads to renewal God's way.

As a whole, the New Testament writings give very little attention to Greek terms related to friendship (*philia*).¹ By contrast, Luke shows a strong interest, including in his Gospel ten identifiable passages that contain friendship-related words: (7:1–10; 7:24–35; 11:5–8; 12:2–10; 14:1–24; 15:1–10; 15:11–32; 16:1–13; 21:8–36; 23:6–16).² A number of these passages are found only in Luke's Gospel, while other passages are common traditions with either Mark or Matthew (or both) to which Luke has added distinctive friendship words and themes. Commentators continue to overlook the strong theme of friendship in Luke's Gospel despite a long-standing recognition that friendship is a crucial element in Acts.³ Hence, it is appropriate to explore the subject here. Due to constraints of time and space, in this essay I will not take the passages in strict serial fashion but will proceed in a topical manner.

Friendship in New Testament Times

Luke writes his Gospel in story form. The reader is invited to participate in the story and thereby be transformed by God's message. Luke shapes and crafts the story based on how his first-century audience will recognize and respond to certain taken-for-granted knowledge. His audience is undoubtedly made up of a mix of wealthy and poor members.⁴ Luke assumes his audience is well acquainted with the social convention of friendship as it operated in New Testament times. It stands to reason, then, that we also should consider the protocol of friendship during Luke's day.

Friendship as a Greco-Roman social convention found its greatest expression among landed, wealthy, aristocratic patrons. Friendship was built on reciprocity, whether in the form of gift-giving, hospitality, or political support; it maintained bonds forged in honor, prestige, and loyalty.⁵ Somewhat paradoxically, these same attributes that cemented the bonds of relationship also opened the door to competition; that is, maneuvering for positions of *greatest* honor or prestige. Friendship was viewed as that which took place among equals. In aristocratic circles, then, friendship took place among those of the same social class and standing; realistically, the goal was relative equality with *some* status distinction allowed. Friends had *the means* to ensure mutual and reciprocal advantage. Time was not expended on those of lower social standing and, as a rule,

neither was charity given to the disadvantaged.⁶ Resources were used to solidify and maintain bonds that provided insurance (by “calling in favors”) in the event of great loss (slander or suit in court by one’s enemies, shipwreck of business ventures, fire, natural disasters, or loss of political position, for example).

At the time of the New Testament, friendship was being redefined in at least two quarters. Moral philosophers, reacting to the decadence in lifestyle and relationships among aristocrats, forged bonds of friendship among equals based not solely upon the redistribution of material means but upon the mutual encouragement toward virtue that leads to proper living and true happiness.⁷ Artisans and others formed voluntary associations of friendship built on an interesting mix of equality and temporary prestige occasioned through monthly banquet celebrations.⁸ In sum, at the time of the New Testament the framework of friendship was highly valued in aristocratic circles, but certain groups felt the need to redefine friendship along the lines of their own social, religious, and moral commitments.

All of this becomes extremely interesting when one looks at the “Lessons to Guests and Host” passage (14:7–14) in Luke’s Gospel. Jesus specifically counsels a ruler (who is entertaining high-status guests), “Do not invite your friends (*philous*).” This is a direct contradiction to the ruler’s practice and to the social convention of friendship known at the time. Luke’s intentional use of friendship terms, on the one hand, and his sharp critique of prevailing friendship protocol, on the other hand, indicate that Luke also desires to maintain the framework of friendship while redefining it along the lines of his own social, religious, and moral convictions.

God as Friend

Following the Lord’s prayer, Jesus tells his disciples the parable of “The Friend at Midnight” (11:5–8). Only Luke has this story of a friend caught short of bread, needed for hospitality, at a late hour. While the point of the parable centers on “importunity” (bold and continual asking), the background of the parable is also pregnant with friendship ideas of reciprocity and giving. The four repetitions of *friend* as direct address (*philon*, *phile*, *philos*, *philon*) heighten this background.⁹ In light of the parable and the larger context (11:1–13), God is to be the friend of the praying petitioner (11:2–3; 8–10). God reciprocates and gives—“For everyone who asks receives . . .” (11:10). To depend upon God as friend and to depend upon God’s care

through those in the community of the Holy Spirit (see 11:13) is *to be free* from having to maintain all Greco-Roman friendship obligations.

Can one truly depend upon God and not the structures of the world? According to Luke, one can and one must. In 12:13–34, Luke provides both a negative example and a positive example of responding appropriately to God. A rich fool hoards wealth and puts assurance in the social conventions and wealth-building strategies of the world—and he loses everything! But faithful disciples do not worry; they trust in God’s benevolence and friendship, and they sell their possessions in order to give charity¹⁰—and *they* gain the Kingdom! To be befriended by God and to reciprocate are everything.

Jesus as Friend: Our Model for True Friendship

Of course, what can be said about God is *demonstrated* in Jesus. As God’s prophet and agent for renewal, Jesus shows the true heart of God and does the very acts of God: preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming release to captives and the recovering of sight to the blind, setting at liberty those who are oppressed, and proclaiming a time of God’s favor (see 4:18–21; 7:22; 14:13). Jesus demonstrates that it is God’s purpose to actively befriend the needy.

For his trouble, Jesus is derisively (but accurately) labeled “a *friend* of tax collectors and sinners!” (7:34). Yet Jesus remains faithful to God, the true Friend, and invites others to join him in this redefined friendship and in its call to faithfulness (12:4—“I tell you, my *friends*, . . .”).¹¹ Friendship is a reciprocal relationship between Jesus and faithful disciples.

Luke’s deep concern to redefine friendship for his community finds clear expression in the passage on the “Lesson to Guests and Host” (14:7–14). This passage, found only in Luke, teaches about response to and provision for hospitality while eating at table. Here, indeed, the facets of Greco-Roman friendship are stood on their heads. Members of the church are not to compete for positions of status or power by seeking out places of honor. Indeed, those who are humble are recognized as friend (*phile*, 14:10). In addition, community members of means who would act as host must not operate with reciprocal patterns that serve only to build security and maintain privileged positions. Hosts who invite well do not invite their own *friends*, or brothers, or kinsmen, or *rich neighbors*¹²—hoping for reciprocation! Consistency with the example of Jesus is quite

clear. Friendship is Jesus-shaped—inviting (= caring for the needs of) the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind (4:18–21; 7:22; 14:13). Put another way, Christian friendship is being a friend of Jesus—and a friend *like* Jesus, the one called “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (7:34). True friendship is being a friend of God—being “repaid at the resurrection of the just” (14:14); being invited to the eschatological Great Banquet (14:15–24).

Luke’s Jesus does not denounce eating with friends as a proper social convention. Rather, the challenge is, will we take as our friends those for whom God cares? Luke 15 contains a number of parables found only in Luke’s gospel. Here, the context of table fellowship continues (15:2). The special Lukan concern for friendship is found interspersed in verses 6, 9, and 29. The first two parables (“The Lost Sheep” and “The Lost Coin”) are connected by a common theme of “lost/rejoice” and a number of common phrases, of which “he/she calls together his/her *friends* and neighbors” is of most interest to us here. It is proper for Christians to feast and rejoice (as God does) when those who are lost and in need of God’s care are found. The well-known parable of “The Prodigal Son” follows with its amplification of the common themes of (1) lost, (2) found, (3) feasting, and (4) friends (15:28–32). After all that time squandering his inheritance, who were those friends of the prodigal back home? They were those who accepted, provided for, and rejoiced with the now found one.¹³

The parable of “The Unjust Steward” is, again, material found only in Luke’s Gospel. Here the story is about the steward of a rich man who craftily attempts to win favor with his fellows before being relieved of his duties. Note the recurring themes (rich man, friends, money) and Jesus’ summation of the point: “Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may take you into eternal habitations” (16:9). Often our response to this verse is, “How could Jesus say that?” or, “The verse cannot be taken at face value.” On the contrary, if we interpret the verse in light of the friendship structures of the time and Luke’s transformation of the idea concerning on whom friendship is to be bestowed, then the verse is very straightforward! Any wealthy Greco-Roman citizen knew how to make friends by means of money (= mammon)—he operated this way all the time. But wealthy members of Luke’s community must act in a new and transformed way of friendship. They should sell possessions and give charity (12:33), for there is a relationship between friendship structures and money in the

kingdom of God: money is to be used to reduce the needs of friends in the community. Of course, those who are “friends of money” (*philargyroi*) may take offense at this way (16:14). Nevertheless, it is the way of God, and to depart from it is grim news, as is clearly indicated by the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, which immediately follows (16:19–31).

Hope Followed by Further Warnings Against Untransformed Friendship

For people of means, a classification for which most of us in the North American hemisphere qualify, Luke’s discussion of wealth and friendship is tough medicine. No doubt there were members of Luke’s community who perceived it so. The wealthy way of life was built on the giving and receiving (reciprocity) of goods and services from friends to friends. To no longer reciprocate with friends in one’s status class was potentially to abdicate the very means of wealth and the wealthy lifestyle. Luke realizes that it will take a lot of persuading to convince the wealthy that the Christian community will provide for their needs and security.

Luke proves to be quite practical in these matters. There is certainly a tension between the necessity to share one’s possessions with those in need and still to remain classified a rich person. Nevertheless, Luke’s message maintains a place for wealthy Christians. As Walter Pilgrim has demonstrated, the figure of Zacchaeus (19:1–10) mediates the building tension felt by some readers of Luke’s Gospel between (1) the uncompromising obligation to the needy and (2) retaining *some* well-to-do status. Zacchaeus is the “Lukan Paradigm for Rich Christians”; the one whose sacrifice (one-half of his possessions) is considerable *and acceptable* (19:9) before Jesus.¹⁴ The overall paradigm in Luke remains one of flexibility and accountability to one’s conscience—but one that is never devoid of responsibility for tangible action, for sharing with the needy.

Luke’s Gospel closes with negative aspects of friendship. Untransformed friends (only in Luke!) also may prove to be deceivers in the times of eschatological upheaval (21:16). Further, in the depiction of the trial of Jesus, there is the Lukan addition, “And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other” (23:12). Aristocratic/political relationships of the wealthy and powerful were built on the concepts of friendship and enmity evident in the traditional maxim: “Help a friend and harm an enemy.”¹⁵

The trial of Jesus offered the opportunity for Herod and Pilate to find commonality and to establish friendship. In one verse, Luke has simply stated the Greco-Roman friendship model.

It may be instructive to look at the example of Herod Antipas and Pilate in light of Luke's unfolding story of friendship. My interpretation of the transformation of friendship in Luke's Gospel indicates that (1) God is a friend who provides for the faithful disciple's needs, (2) Jesus seeks to establish friendship with those who are in need, and (3) Christians are to act like Jesus in developing friendships among the needy while laying aside some of the security trappings found in wealth and its obligatory relationships. If my interpretation is correct, then the friendship model of Pilate and Herod stands in stark contrast to the friendship material that has preceded it. In other words, if you are wealthy and Luke has not *yet* convinced you of your need to change your friendship patterns, then you are put in a very uncomfortable position. The message to the reader/listener of Luke's Gospel is "Do you want to remain part of *this friendship pattern exemplified by Herod and Pilate?* They crucified Jesus!"

Notes

¹See G. Stahlin, "philos, phile, philia," *TDNT*, Vol. 9. This is not the case for the ideal of friendship (*philia*) as a key part of the cultural milieu behind the writings of the New Testament, as is evidenced in recent sociological approaches to the New Testament and in Pauline studies. Representative examples are Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, LEC 6 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 27–31; Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 68–72; 101–07.

²Stahlin, "philos, phile, philia," 159–64. Although not as explicitly, John's Gospel also can be profitably mined for its concern with friendship.

³Often Luke's use of friendship language is passed over without comment or it is simply stated that "friend" is a favorite word of Luke. See E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1966), 118–9, 120–3, 163, 174, 193, 201–02, 264. Of nine relevant friendship passages, Ellis makes nominal comment on only two. Fitzmyer (*The Gospel According to Luke*, Anchor Bible 25 & 25A [New York: Doubleday, 1985]) comments on friendship themes in various passages but does not attempt to highlight friendship as a special Lukan theme. He notes Luke's redactional addition of friendship words and is content to suggest that they are favorites of Luke. The recent extensive commentary by Darrell Bock (*Luke*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 3A & 3B [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994/96]) continues the trend. Much of the commentary tradition overlooks a twenty-year old suggestion by Robert J. Karris ("The Lukan Sitz im Leben: Methodology and Prospects" in *Society of Biblical Literature 1976 Seminar Papers*, ed. George MacRae [Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976], 219–33) that the convention of Greco-Roman friendship was important to a correct understanding of Luke 14:1–24. My own interest and further study

Application Within the Church

Given Luke's strong emphasis on friendship, it should not come as a surprise that both the Gospel and Acts are addressed to Theophilus, or "Friend of God" (*Theophile*). Whether this address is to a specific individual or to the community at large, it is a direct indication that Luke desires his audience to find friendship with God, Jesus, and one another in authentic Christian community. Our challenge today is to restore and cultivate intentional friendship among our church members despite the time pressures, fragmentation, and growing isolation that rule the day. Furthermore, our challenge is to redefine and redirect the criteria by which we decide who should be the recipients of our time, resources, and reciprocity.¹⁶ We would do well to take Jesus as our model, befriending the needy, for whom our heavenly Father cares greatly.

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on this subject has been stimulated by Karris's fine study.

On the idea of the early Christian community in Acts as fulfilling the Greek ideal of friendship, see Luke T. Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts*, SBLDS 39 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), 5. Johnson notes the agreement of Haenchen, Cerfaux, Degenhardt, Plumacher, and Dupont on this point.

⁴See the chapter "The Poor and the Rich" in Philip F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 164–200.

⁵For a general background to aristocratic friendship, see John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment*, LEC 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 63–4. For more sustained treatment, see Gabriel Herman, *Ritualised Friendship and the Greek City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁶See the chapters on "Pity for the Destitute" and "The Provision of Basic Commodities" in A. R. Hands, *Charities and Social Aid in Greece and Rome* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1968), 77–115. Somewhat against the grain, Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) tentatively began to consider friendship among "less than equals" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.1159a.27; 8.1155b.31). This provided a direction for the discussion of friendship among moral philosophers of the Hellenistic period.

⁷Following the hints of Plato (427–347 B.C.) and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), Hellenistic moral philosophers at the time of the first-century A.D. (such as the Synics, Stoics, and Epicureans) spoke of friendship apart from honor, power, or political connections; friendship belonged in the context of nurturing virtue as it relates to the individual soul. See (Stowers, *Letter Writing*, 31; Abraham J. (notes continue on page 13)