

Psalm 25:14

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[0 : 0 0] How many friends do you have?

I was checking today, so it's hot off the press. I have 444 friends. Exactly, 444. I was quite taken by the symmetry of the number.

It's quite an impressive haul, but as I'm sure many of you have already worked out, what I'm talking about are not real friends, but my Facebook friends.

And no slight intended if you're one of my Facebook friends. But 444. I'm sure if I went through them, there'd be some people I don't even know who they are. I don't know how they got there, but there they are.

444. Now, when I make that distinction between friends and real friends, a question you could ask, a very reasonable question, would be, well, what is a real friend?

[0 : 5 8] What is the definition? What are the criteria that establish whether a friend is a real friend? That's really quite a probing question and quite a difficult question to answer.

What is a real friend? Well, this evening I want to explore the theme of friendship, but very particularly friendship with God.

And I want to do so with the help of a verse that we find in the psalm that we have read, Psalm 25. And our attention will concentrate particularly on verse 14.

Now, I'll read it again in the church Bible, the version of the Bible, the New International Version. And there the verse is rendered in this way.

The Lord confides in those who fear Him. He makes His covenant known to them. But in the brief outline that you also have in front of you, I've also provided an alternative translation from the English Standard Version.

[2 : 1 0] And it reads like follows. The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He makes known to them His covenant.

The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He makes known to them His covenant. The theme of the verse is about friendship with God, a friendship that God expresses in a particular way, by confiding in His friends.

Really, if you combine the two translations, or the first part of the verse and the two translations, you can come up with that conclusion. It's about friendship with God, and how God expresses that friendship by confiding in His friends.

Well, let's explore together this wonderful possibility of friendship with God by asking three questions of the verse before us.

Who are the Lord's friends, according to the verse? What does the friendship of the Lord involve or look like? And what can you do to cultivate and experience this friendship?

[3 : 2 9] So these three questions we want to think about just for a brief moment. The first question then is, Who are the Lord's friends, according to the verse?

The Lord confides in those who fear Him, or the friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him. So the answer to this question, I think, is fairly clear.

The Lord's friends are those who fear Him. Now, let's just think about that, and what we want to do as we think about it is to notice two things that we can say concerning the meaning and place of fearing the Lord.

It's maybe in our conception of friendship, this wouldn't be something that would be very prominent when we think of friendships that we can enjoy one with another. The idea of that involving some kind of fear seems really quite alien to the very concept of friendship.

And so, in some ways, it's a surprise to find this as, if you wish, a description of, or in any case, something central to this matter of friendship with God, that the Lord's friends are those who fear Him.

[4 : 41] Now, to understand then why that is how this reality is expressed, we want to say two things concerning the meaning and the place of fearing the Lord.

So, first of all, the meaning, but then also the place that it occupies in this friendship. First of all, the meaning of this expression, to fear the Lord. The Lord confides in those who fear Him, or the friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him.

What does that mean, to fear God? Well, as I'm sure you have heard often explained, to fear the Lord is to respect Him.

It is to take God seriously. And to fear God requires a knowledge of God born of a relationship with God.

You simply can't fear the Lord in the sense implied by the Word, as used in the Bible, if you do not know God. If you don't know God, you cannot fear God in the manner that the Bible understands and presents this word.

[5 : 50] It requires knowledge of God in order that we would fear God as we ought. As we get to know God for who He is, as we discover God to be, as He reveals Himself in the Bible, to be holy, to be pure, to be just, to be gracious and merciful and loving.

As these things we discover concerning God, as we would know God, then we are drawn to love God, but also to fear and respect Him and be concerned with what He thinks of us and the lives that we live before Him.

To fear God, as somebody has put it, I think quite helpfully, if not exhaustively, but certainly helpfully, to fear God is to both dread His frown and to cherish His smile.

These two elements combine in what the Bible understands by speaking of us fearing God. So that, in regard to the meaning of this, as we would consider this question, who are the Lord's friends?

Well, they are those who fear Him. Well, let's be clear what that actually means, and there is some kind of answer to that part of it. But what about the place that fearing God occupies in this friendship?

[7 : 14] I think it follows from what we have just said concerning the meaning of the word that fearing God cannot be a condition for, but evidence of friendship with God.

So it's not the case that God says, well, if you want to be my friend, then you have to fear me. And if you fear me, well, then you can be my friend. That's not what God says.

Any more than He says to us, well, if you obey me, then I'll be your God. But if you don't obey me, well, then I will have nothing to do with you.

This is not a condition that God places in order that if we meet that condition, well, then we can enjoy this privilege or some kind of prize for doing what is required of us.

Rather, the place of fearing God, to use that expression, is that in an existing relationship of friendship with God that is grounded in grateful love, evidence of the genuineness and of the seriousness of the relationship or friendship is demonstrated by fearing God, by obeying God.

[8 : 26] And so, it's evidence of an existing relationship rather than a condition that we would enter into that relationship, in this case, of friendship with God as the verse speaks.

So, if we're saying that, well, this is evidence of an existing relationship, it does rather beg the question and an important question, that isn't going to occupy us, really, but that we want to just at least, albeit fleetingly, comment on, how does the relationship begin?

If this is not something that we need to do in order to enjoy this relationship, if rather it's evidence of an existing relationship, well, how does that relationship with God begin? Well, the Bible is clear on that matter.

That relationship begins, certainly from our side, as it were, as we put our trust in God. Indeed, this psalm begins stressing the importance of trusting in God.

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. In you, I trust, O my God. And the psalmist continues. And this matter of trusting in God is understood better in terms of what it involves in the light of the fuller revelation that we have from God in the New Testament and in the person of His Son, Jesus.

[9 : 48] And we discover there that trusting in God involves trusting in Jesus, God's own Son, as our Savior and Lord. That is where the relationship begins. And having begun this relationship with God, and as we are drawn to a greater understanding of who He is and to know Him better, so that results in us fearing Him and respecting Him and honoring Him as He deserves and as is proper for us.

We would have had no notion that God was to be feared and respected in this way in the absence of a knowledge of Him and indeed of a relationship with Him.

So who are the Lord's friends? They are those who fear Him. Properly understood what that means and properly understood the place that it occupies in the relationship.

Well, that takes us on to the second question that we want to just notice this evening. And that question is, what does this friendship involve? What does this friendship involve?

And this is really the heart of the matter or certainly the heart of the verse before us, particularly as we have it translated in the ESV.

[11 : 05] The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him and He makes known to them His covenant. Before we think about what this friendship involves in the light of this verse, perhaps just a very quick caveat, and that is to simply recognize what perhaps is obvious but is worth stressing or making the point that this verse is not intended to be an exhaustive presentation of what is involved in friendship with God but addresses one element, you might say one central plank.

Well, what does the verse say? And as I have provided two translations of the verse and the reason for that is because I think the two of them together help us have a better grasp of what is the meaning.

So I think we do need to just think a little bit about how these two alternative ways of translating the verse come together and what they signify. So maybe what we can do is simply look at the two ways in which the verse is translated and just comment on each of them and see that they're not mutually exclusive or certainly not contradictory but in a sense they kind of enrich each other in terms of our understanding.

If we begin with the translation that involves this word friendship, the friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him and He, that is, the Lord, makes known to them His covenant.

This translation suggests that the psalmist is presenting two distinct though connected privileges granted to those who fear the Lord, namely friendship and knowledge.

[12 : 52] So they're very connected but they're distinct. So those who fear the Lord enjoy these privileges. They enjoy friendship and they enjoy knowledge, friendship with God and knowledge from God or of God.

But as the verse is there before us, we're somewhat left in the dark or certainly unclear as to what the friendship aspect of the relationship involves.

So it's stated that we have this friendship with God but what does that look like? What does that actually involve? And I think moving on to the second translation helps us, I think, to kind of answer that part of it or that query.

Because the NIV renders the verse in this way, the Lord confides in those who fear Him, semicolon, punctuation can be very important, He makes His covenant known to them.

And I want you to notice that semicolon and how its use captures, seems to me, more clearly the author's intention in making known what friendship with God involves.

[13 : 58] God confides in those who fear Him. This is an expression of friendship. But the big question is, what does He confide? What is the content of this confidential information that He confides in those who fear Him?

Well, we're told He makes His covenant known to them. So I think that the way in which the verse is translated in the version that we have before us, I think helpfully captures what this friendship involves.

It involves God confiding in us. It involves God making known to us very particularly His covenant.

The friendship of the Lord finds expression in this way. Or God demonstrates His friendship in this way. He makes known to us His covenant.

Now, how does that grab you? Is that perhaps a bit of an anticlimax? This theme, this very suggestive theme of a friendship with God.

[15 : 03] What does friendship with God look like? What does it involve? And here we find that well, all it really involves is that He makes known to us His covenant. He makes known to us some dry legal document that regulates His relationship with His people.

He confides in us a never-ending list of rules and regulations. Now, that doesn't sound too appealing as a description of what friendship with God involves.

But let's think about this a little bit more. This way in which God's friendship finds expression in Him making known to us His covenant. What is it that God confides to us in making known His covenant?

I think we could call what He makes known to us in making known to us His covenant, we could call them His love secrets.

Because you see, at the heart of the covenant is the loving heart of God. The covenant that God has established to regulate His relationship with His people is the means whereby God enters into and cultivates and protects a loving and saving relationship with His chosen people.

[16 : 25] The covenant is born of God's love. love. It arises out of God's love. It is the manner in which God is able to love us as His own people.

Now, in the Old Testament, the central covenant ceremony, or certainly a central covenant ceremony, was the Passover meal.

And the Passover meal was a remembrance and celebration of precisely God's loving, merciful, compassionate deliverance of His people from slavery in Egypt and indeed certain death.

And that deliverance, that covenant deliverance was secured by the means of the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. You remember the account in the Old Testament concerning what the people were asked to do, that they might be protected from death.

And it involved the slaying, the killing, the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. So what is the motivation for the covenant that God makes known to us as an expression of His love and of His friendship?

[17 : 37] Well, the motivation for the covenant is God's love. What is the pivotal act of covenant and love and faithfulness on the part of God that the Passover meal pointed forward to?

Well, the pivotal act in history is the giving by God of His own Son, Jesus, to die as the Passover lamb or covenant sacrifice.

We've read in Luke chapter 22 that the occasion when Jesus celebrated the Passover with His disciples and the language that He employs, this cup is the new covenant in my blood.

So then, when God speaks of making known His covenant as He does in this verse in the psalm, He's speaking of wanting to confide in His friends all that He has done for us as His friends.

He wants to confide in His friends everything about His precious and beloved Son, Jesus, the one in whom He as the Father is well pleased.

[18 : 44] We can picture what the verse is saying or in some way paraphrase what the verse is saying in this way. God invites His people, His friends to gather around and to listen well and then He says to us, let me tell you about Jesus.

The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him and He makes known to them His covenant. So that's perhaps at least in some measure an answer to the question what does this friendship involve?

But moving on to the third and the final question that we want to pose and try and answer it is this. What can I do? What can you do to experience and cultivate this friendship?

Now even to speak of cultivating a friendship is to recognize that there are degrees of friendship or certainly degrees to which we enjoy and appreciate a friendship.

And here we do have to be careful. I would want to be very clear that in saying this, this has nothing to do with favoritism when we speak of degrees of friendship. It's nothing to do with favoritism.

[19 : 54] It's not that from God's side he is more friendly to one than to another of his own. This rather is about how we respond to God's loving advances and so as we do how we can appreciate and enjoy that friendship.

On God's side there is utter consistency. But on our side there can be very different responses and those different responses will impact on the manner in which we experience and enjoy the friendship that is available to us.

Indeed, even being aware that such a friendship is available to us. Well with that in mind, how can we experience and cultivate friendship with God?

And this is a question that is relevant for all. Whatever your circumstances are wherever you stand in relation to God. Perhaps you have never come to know God and so consequently have never experienced friendship with God.

Well this is relevant for you to consider this question. How can you experience friendship with God? Perhaps for those of us who though we have by grace come to know God, perhaps in some measure know what it is to enjoy friendship with God, we'd have to say that that relationship is not a very close relationship.

[21 : 23] So for us too there is this invitation to respond in a more fitting way and so experience more richly the friendship with God that He offers to us.

Or perhaps for some of us we can look back on our Christian experience and we can perhaps with some sadness say, well in the past I knew and experienced something of that friendship with God in a way that I don't now.

Something has happened somewhere along the way there seems to have been this drifting apart and again obviously it's always from our side rather than from God's side.

Well what can we do in order to experience and cultivate and enjoy perhaps would be the better word friendship with God. Well the psalmist provides an answer to that question and he provides certainly part of the answer in the very next verse in verse 15.

He goes on to say there my eyes are ever on the Lord. My eyes are ever on the Lord. And this picture that is painted by the psalmist of his eyes ever on the Lord is the picture of one who is eager to hear the voice of God.

[22 : 40] One who expectantly looks forward to what God has to say in and through his word. This picture contemplates the believer hanging on every word of the one who loves him so.

And how can we or what does this look like this description that the psalmist provides somewhat in poetic language my eyes are ever on the Lord in practical terms how do we do that?

What does that look like? What do we do if our eyes are to be ever on the Lord? Well let me suggest what it involves or some of what it involves. It certainly involves necessarily involves and principally involves spending time with God.

And the Bible is clear on the manner in which we can spend time with God as we can speak to him in prayer and as we can listen to him speaking to us as we meditate on God's word.

We can do that together as we are gathered this evening for example but also each of us in our own time as it were and alone with God spending time with him fixing our eyes upon him to use the language of the psalmist my eyes are ever on the Lord is the testimony of the psalmist.

[24 : 04] So this involves spending time with God but I think we can also say without stretching things in a manner that's unwarranted it also involves spending time in the company of God's people.

You know we hear a lot these days in the context of conflict in the Middle East that my enemy's enemy is my friend. I'm sure you've heard that expression a lot in regard to Syria and the different groups that are vying and jockeying for position there.

My enemy's enemy is my friend. Well I don't know if that's a way to see things or not but what is certainly true in the matter of friendship with God is that my friend's friend is my friend.

Hence the importance of fellowship one with another as believers. We not only share in a heavenly father and that of course unites us as sons and daughters who share one heavenly father but we also on the basis of the language that God himself uses here in this psalm we also share a common friend.

And so to enjoy that friendship to cultivate that friendship involves spending time with God but spending time with God also in the company of God's people.

[25 : 22] And then one third thing that I would suggest that it involves is that it involves listening to and acting on what the Lord confides to you. Here the psalmist describes how the Lord confides in those who fear Him.

He makes known to them His covenant. Information is provided. Truths are communicated. Instruction is given by God lovingly and generously and graciously to us.

Now we need to listen to that. We need to sense that the privilege that God would confide in us and to us and listen and hear what He has to say but then if there's going to be any coherence there needs to be a response.

We need to act on that which the Lord confides to us. And the seriousness with which you listen, the seriousness with which we listen and act will reveal the measure in which you fear God which just takes us really a full circle to where we began with the psalm.

The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him and He makes known to them His covenant. Here a door is opened if you wish.

[26 : 39] This wonderful opportunity is presented that we sinners though we are and creatures though we are and seemingly those who would appear to be so unsuited to friendship with the Almighty and yet God Himself says no, this is what I provide, this is what I would have to characterize my relationship with you and the invitation is extended that we would respond and enjoy that which God purposes for us.

May that be increasingly our experience as believers that the friendship of the Lord would be with us those who fear Him those to whom He makes known His covenant.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father we do thank You for the Bible we thank You that You are a God who confides in us You are a God who makes known to us Your covenant we thank You that the very fact that we can open a Bible and read and hear what You have to say to us is an expression of Your love is a demonstration of Your friendship.

We pray that we would see it in those terms and be grateful to You for this wonderful expression of Your love. Help us to be those who increasingly as we would know You so we would increasingly love You but also increasingly fear You honor You and respect You and seek to be obedient to You.

Help us as we continue perhaps to consider these matters and how they impact on our own lives and how we live our lives and how we relate to You and all of these things we pray in Jesus' name.

[28 : 18] Amen.