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Q&A#67 Should Christians be Friends with Non Christians?

October 8, 2018



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Today's question: "What is your opinion on close-knit churches that teach members to not become close friends with outsiders/heathens? They teach to be courteous and you can have friendly acquaintances with outsiders, but teach that friendship with the world is enmity with God."

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what is your opinion on close-knit churches that teach members to not become close friends with outsiders, heathens? They teach to be courteous, and you can have friendly acquaintances with outsiders, but teach that friendship with the world is enmity with God. Well, clearly we have that teaching in scripture, that friendship with the world is enmity with God.

The question is, how do we understand this? We also have a number of other warnings about bad company corrupting good character. This is something that frequently occurs within the book of Proverbs. It's a running theme that getting into gangs for young men is something that corrupts character, and people in those situations are usually led astray into wickedness.

They follow after their peers. There's also the fact that friendships are powerful in shaping character because we have the sense of loyalty to our friends. We don't want to

offend our friends, something that you see a lot of the time is people being forceful in their criticisms of anyone on some other side, perceived to be their opponents, but pulling all of their punches when it comes to their friends, an unwillingness to criticize, this tempering of all criticism, and this very soft accommodation of the faults and the sins of those who are closest to them, of those to whom they feel some sense of affinity, some sense of appreciation.

So assessing your friendships and being aware of those friendships' moral effect upon you is something that the scripture continually enjoins us to. There's this danger of being led astray by the affections that we have for our friends, by the affections that we have for those closest to us. And again and again, we see this in scripture that people are led astray by their pity, by their affection, by the love that they have for the people closest to them, whether that's husband for a wife, and the danger in Proverbs and elsewhere is also within the history of Israel of husbands being led astray by their love for their wives.

Or in Deuteronomy, I think it is, where it talks about the danger of pity for the family member, preventing you from arresting the movement into idolatry. And this need to draw a sharp line. And the Levites even being praised for taking the lives of their brothers, lest they be led astray.

This staunching of the wound that would lead you into error. And so when we are talking about friendships, there's clearly a specific danger that comes with friendship. Friendship is not an entirely good thing.

There can be dangerous friendships, friendships that we should avoid. Even when we're righteous people, to be friends with people who are unrighteous, who are given to unrighteous ways, we are putting our souls in danger if we are not careful. So you need to be careful in those sorts of situations.

But is there a blanket warning against friendships with people outside of the church, people who are unbelievers? No, I don't believe that there is. I believe there are particular warnings given against association with people who claim the name of Christ and are people who are drawn to wickedness. And that's an interesting thing because there are certain forms of people who are very close to us, who have a particular set of affinities to us, where there is a greater danger of not drawing the lines.

And that comes when it's most difficult to draw the lines when people are very close to us. When someone professes the name of Christ and yet is unfaithful, that is a far more dangerous situation in many respects than someone who does not claim the name of Christ. And yet we would count as a friend.

The danger comes when that person is so close to us that the differences are things that we would be tempted to cover over. In other cases where the differences are apparent, it's not such a danger. And so we do have these warnings within Paul's teaching in 1

Corinthians, the warning of associating with the unbelieving or the unfaithful sexually immoral man.

But then he writes, I write to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people, yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world or with the covetous or extortionate people of this world. I have written to you as an extortionist or idolater since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother who is a fornicator or covetous or an idolater or a violet or a drunkard or an extortioner, not even to eat with such a person.

So we see a distinction drawn there. He's drawing a specifically sharp line here. This is a Christian that you do not keep company with in any capacity.

Now, you can keep company with unbelievers that have these traits, but this is not a matter of being friends with them. Now, I think there is an analogy though, with friendship here, that there are friendships that can be made with unbelievers that recognize the danger of an unwary friendship, that recognize the danger of getting into the company of people who will lead us astray, and yet that recognize that there can be considerable common ground between non-Christians and Christians. And this is, I think, an area where an understanding of things such as natural law and not taking an extreme antithesis can be important because if you take that extreme antithesis, the wicked and the righteous, and the righteous are in the church, and the unrighteous are those who do not believe in Christ, that if that's the only way that you think about things, and you have no sense of moral company that may not be Christian, and a sense of common ground in those sorts of instances, then I think we curtail our friendships in a very dangerous way, and we become sectarian, and we also cut ourselves off from things that will challenge us and bring us towards virtue because there are many friendships, even with non-believers, that will draw us in the direction of some sort of general civic virtue.

Now, there are further dangers to be noted here, that the church that teaches members not to become close friends with outsiders is also the sort of church in which there is generally a festering distrust for wider structures of society, rather than a prudent yet critical engagement within them. So this is the sort of church where you would expect if there are sexual abuse that occurs, they would be wary of reporting it to the authorities, or there's a general suspicion around science, or conspiracy theories that are associated with certain things, because there is this generalized distrust of non-Christians, rather than a recognition that there is considerable common ground to be found, even on a general moral framework, and there are certain non-Christian company that can be good for us. Now, that can be challenging for some people to think about, who draw the antithesis very sharply, and do not recognize virtue of any sort, readily within the lives of unbelievers.

But I think there is a limited and stifled virtue to be found in those situations, and it may be limited and stifled, but it is nonetheless something that is real, and we can benefit from certain friendships. Now, this is not friendships with sexually immoral people, with fornicators, with idolaters, in their idolatry and their fornication and all these sorts of things. We do not follow people into those sorts of sins, and we should be discerning and prudent and discriminating in our choice of friends.

There are ways in which we can be friends with people who are, as Paul says, people who are within the world, who have these certain sins in their lives, and we can be friends with them while keeping a distance. And that is made easier by the fact that if we make it clear from the very outset that we are Christians and they are not, that very difference serves as a sort of buffer. But when they claim the name of Christ, it becomes considerably more complicated.

So I believe that there are good reasons why we should have such friendships. There are also reasons why such friendships can be good for us. They can be good for us in drawing us away from our sectarianism.

They can be good for us in helping us to recognize good traits that exist within the world and within unbelievers, things that we can learn from. They are things that will push back against the tendencies towards sin in our own immediate communities. So the sectarian community is always in danger of having credulity for conspiracy theories and things like this, an overweening trust in its own members of its community, particularly its leaders, and a failure to recognize that there are people outside the community that can challenge the dangers of going too far in that direction.

So I believe that we should become, we should actually pursue friendships with people outside of the church. These friendships should be discriminating. They should be aware of the dangers of being led into sinful behaviors, but they should be prepared to, they should come with a certain degree of openness to learn from people who are not Christians, who may have perspectives upon our community that challenge us.

And that, I believe, could prevent a lot of the problems that we do see in certain churches, whether a suspicion of authorities, suspicion of outsiders, suspicion of learning that would seem to come from a position of disbelief in God. Now, there's a lot that can be learned from that sort of scholarship if you approach it wisely in a discriminating fashion. And so more generally, in human life, we need to be those who develop healthy networks of trust.

And that requires not being just naive and accepting everything that is given to us. It requires drawing certain boundaries and recognizing certain things where we do not follow others or trust, or matters in which we do not trust them. But also involves recognizing these areas where even people who may be distrusted on certain grounds, may not have a clear apprehension of the truth on certain fronts, are nonetheless to be

trusted in certain matters, to be appealed to in certain matters, that they might have something from which we can gain.

And we do see some of these friendships in scripture, I think. We see some of the relationships that develop between the people of God and people outside of the people of God, people outside of the church, Gentile rulers, for instance. We see a number of examples of this in the Old Testament, and how through the positive witness and influence of a good Christian, or of a faithful believer, they can be led to a deeper understanding of the truth.

Even in their unbelief, they can be drawn to an appreciation that there is something about this person that's righteous, that they can learn from. And I believe that there is a certain sort of friendship evangelism that can take place. There's a lot of things that take place under friendship evangelism that we need to be cautious about, just like flirt to convert and these sorts of things, where people are pursuing friendships with, and relationships with people outside of the church, in an imprudent and culpably foolish manner.

But there are other occasions when we should be pursuing these friendships for our own good, and for the benefit of people outside the church. If we avoid these sorts of friendships altogether, we can easily get into these closed off communities that have this sense of excessive confidence in their possession of the full truth, a failure to recognize the existence of God's truth and wisdom in quarters outside of the church that we can learn from, and a failure to recognize the broader life of the church, because these sorts of closed off communities are often communities that aren't in good communion with the rest of the church. Finally, I think that there is a broader attitude towards human traits and human interests that is important here.

This sort of church, this sort of church that resists closed friendships with people who are outsiders, is also the sort of church that will tend to completely terraform people's lives as it were. When they become Christians, they become a certain sort of clone, a certain sort of person that everyone in that church gradually fits into that mold. They all hang out together, they all do the same sort of thing, and generally that's not just doing Christian things, it's doing things that belong to that particular social context and class, so they'll end up all looking like a certain type of middle class Christian, and that's just not healthy.

What a healthy form of Christianity should recognize is the goodness of certain traits and interests and passions and practices that are found outside the church and the way that those things can be raised to a greater glory as they are practiced in the light of Christ. And I believe that this means that when someone is converted what we'll see is their general traits and their relationships and their connections and their practices and their labor taking on a different, fuller aspect, not being cut out and removed to be replaced

by a clone identity, but that there will be an appreciation of the goodness of those things, the goodness that exists even within things that have problems in their original form, that they can be tempered and they can be purified by God's grace in a way that makes them glorious, that gives that person a distinct character that is their own, and that attitude, the attitude that resists friendship with people outside of the church is also the attitude that will lead us to cut ourselves off from the good things in our lives that existed prior to our conversions. And so recognizing the importance and the value of friendships with people outside of the church is also an attitude to our own lives.

It's an attitude towards the church in general, that the church is not just the sole site of all good things, but rather it's the site where God is gathering things together. And there are riches of the Gentiles to be brought into the church. There are riches of people's lives and characters, and there are riches of cultures, and there are riches of different viewpoints of philosophies and certain forms of scholarship to be brought into the life of the church.

And we can learn, we approach the world not just as those who have, not as those who have the full answers for everything, but as those who stand to learn a great deal. And so for that reason, I think we should be pursuing these relationships. We should not resist them, but we should be prudent in the way that we go about recognizing the warnings of Proverbs and elsewhere in the scripture, but also being open to learning and to be a blessing and to be blessed.

I hope that this is of some help. If you've got any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you'd like to support this and future videos, please do so using my Patreon account.

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