

## **Making Friends in the City What Helps and What Doesn't Help**

### **D) Some idols that work against building friendship**

**(or, Why is the Big Apple so full of gifted, attractive, and lonely people?)**

**(or, Why can't I make friends?)**

We are all worshippers. We either worship the one true God or we worship something created—ourselves, our dream of the successful life, our dream of the perfect church, pleasure, success, appearance, work, appearance, performance, etc. Even our search for friendship can be an idol. The success of our friendship building will depend upon where we have set our hearts.

Note: Creation may be good, but it is not God. There are plenty of things in life that are “good goods” but they are “bad Gods” (terminology is thanks to John Bettler of the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation). It is not necessarily wrong, for example, to dress a certain way for church; but it is wrong and destructive to make appearance the most important thing about relationships at church.

*<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.... <sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.... <sup>25</sup> [T]hey exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. (Romans 1)*

### **A) “Look Good” Idol.** Too much value placed upon appearance

We don't want people to discover that we are “damaged goods”—nor do we want to discover that the people we meet are damaged goods—since that might entail work, and we are too busy for that (bleeds over into the “make good” idol—more later). And so we avoid getting too close for fear of exposure.

#### **Some symptoms:**

We are always “nice”. We never disagree at small group. We are appalled when someone says something surly at church

We are not honest: If we are upset, or depressed, we don't admit it to people.

We gravitate toward people who look a certain way—usually people who look like we do.

We avoid people who don't look or dress or talk like we do

### **B) “Make Good” Idol.** Too much value placed upon performance.

#### **Some symptoms:**

- **We make very little time for friends:** Obsession with high performance at work or perfection at home usually calls for long and exhausting time commitments; and long hours at “work” mean short hours for relationships.
- **The friendships we do have are convenience friendships:** When we make time for people it is only with those who are easy to get to or who are “safe investments” because we know that their issues and circumstances will never pose a threat to our time.

- **We rarely, if ever, admit we are wrong:** When we worship performance it is very hard to admit failure or weakness. This sabotages relationships by making us unapproachable.
- **We perform for our friends:** Our relationships focus on getting things done for our friends. Or they focus on making sure our friends are aware of all the things that we are getting done in life.
- **We expect friends to perform for us:** It is hard for us to accept and respect people for who they are in themselves.
- **We rarely “waste time” with anybody:** Unless we can justify such “waste” we feel guilty and frustrated.

C) **“Feel Good” Idol** Too much value placed upon being happy and enjoying myself.

**Some symptoms:**

- **Entertainment and Busyness:** We are more apt to go clubbing or to movies, shows, and events with our friends than to actually talk with them. Bavarians sit outside all evening sipping beer and schmoozing—a life style that is Martian to New Yorkers.
- **We avoid confrontation:** Confrontation makes neither us nor our friends feel good. There is a risk that we might be wrong and have to face something uncomfortable in ourselves. There is a risk that we might be right and the other person become furious with us.
- **We don’t push our friends to invest in things beyond their personal interest:** This may be the right thing to do as a friend, but we risk their anger and our unhappiness if we try.
- **We give our friends whatever they want:** This can mean agreeing they are right about something when we know they are wrong about it. It can mean indulging them with time and things to keep them (and therefore us) happy. Bill Cosby: “Parents don’t want justice! They want quiet!”
- **We fill our discretionary time with things that make us feel better about ourselves:** No time left for friends.
- **We are brutally honest because it makes us “feel better”:** This is not love; it is selfish catharsis. Honesty must happen, but it must be controlled by what is edifying, not by what makes me feel better.

**II) Some circumstances that work against building friendship:**

The drives to “look good”, to “make good”, to “feel good”, have always been around. But certain sociological and philosophical “circumstances” in the contemporary cultural scene tend to overfeed those drives, making long-term friendship especially difficult.

**A) Widespread family dysfunction.**

When I was an elementary school student in the 1950’s, only one classmate was from a broken home. My own children, by contrast, grew up in the 1980’s surrounded by family failures. What present day “twenty something” wants to risk experiencing (or causing) afresh all the pain he or she endured as a kid? She’d rather stay uncommitted to other people and work on appearance, performance, and pleasure—all of them much easier to manage than serious friendship.

**B) Consumerism:**

We tend to approach everything, including friendships, as products for our use. We “choose” relationships, small groups, churches almost invariably on the grounds of what they do for us. Regarding churches we are driven by the following things: Do they meet at a convenient time (which can mean church-hopping from week to week in order to suit our schedule), do I like the style, do they have enough of my sort of person in them, am I happy there (or as happy as I used to be)).

### **C) Rampant Individualism:**

We highly value the “right” of the individual to reach his or her full potential, to live and act with complete freedom, to “push the envelope” in the pursuit of personal freedom. (Compare the very different worldviews and motivations in “The English Patient” with “Casablanca.” Both films involve love triangles during war time. In the earlier film, the drama resolves around principles of love and self-sacrifice; in the later film, the drama is driven by self-expression and self-fulfillment).

*Achieving happiness has become an overwhelmingly personal, private, even solitary undertaking.  
(Andrew Delbanco, author of “The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope”)*

When it’s “all about me!” I will stop working at relationships when they cease to contribute in some immediate or obvious way to my fulfillment (as they often will—since my friends are apt to be rampant individualists too).

### **D) Over-choice:**

In a city like New York, where the choices are many, varied and nearly always interesting, the temptation never to commit to a particular individual, or group, or church is strong. If I discover a flaw in a person or group (which I will) I can easily move on to some other person or group. NB: There will always be someone, or some group, more compatible (at least in some areas) than the one you are presently with—esp. in NY. Satisfying love cannot happen without commitment; and commitment will never happen unless we choose to rule certain (many) options out.

### **E) Functional Secularism.**

We may say we believe that this is not the only life, but we act as if it were. We are afraid to commit to anything (or anyone) for fear of missing out on something else—which, of course, we will (commitment, by its very nature, reduces our options—you can’t marry Betty if you marry Sue). And we fear “missing out” because, deep down, we believe that if we do not get something here, we will never get it.

## **III) The impact of the gospel on making friends**

We need a strong antidote to the forces that work against friendship. And we have that antidote in Christ.

### **A) Jesus’ death models the only standard for friendship that brings real change**

<sup>12</sup> *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends. (John 15)*

We will never find true friends until we choose to be true friends. And to be a true friend is to “die” for others. To be truly human is to give myself away to other people. The consumer asks, “What can I get from this relationship?” The person who truly lives out what it means to be made

in the image of God is a person who lived as Jesus did, asking, “What can I give to this relationship?”

### **B) Jesus’ cross makes the risks of friendship safer**

*In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins....<sup>18</sup> There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.<sup>19</sup> We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:10, 18-19)*

It is of course risky to love people. Even in the church people may ignore my initiative and may even respond cruelly. But I can still reach out, because my security and significance are in the love of God, who gave his Son for me. Because I can never lose his love I can lovingly challenge you even if that might make you angry. Because I can never lose God’s love, I can do kind and thoughtful things for you even if you never reciprocate. I am not held hostage in my efforts to love by the response of those I choose to love. This reality creates an upward spiral in the building of friendships.

### **C) Jesus chooses my siblings, I don’t. And many of my siblings are not like me.**

*<sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility <sup>15</sup> by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.*

What saying: The cross destroyed the Jew/Gentile divide—and, by implication, every other social and racial divide. We now belong to a diverse family that we cannot avoid or get rid of.

What does this mean: For the gospel’s sake we have an obligation to defy sociological expectations by building friendships with people who are not like us—even people whom we do not like. We are not all called to be each other’s best friends. But we are all called to be brothers and sisters to all those for whom Christ died.

Friendship in the church is mission-driven, not consumer-driven. It’s not just about me having some friends. It is about Christ demonstrating the sociological power of what he has done on the cross, binding diversity together in profound love, so that more and more people will be drawn towards him. We do not fully proclaim the gospel when we do not love those in the church are different from us.

### **D) Jesus’ resurrection gives transforming hope to relationships**

*<sup>6</sup> And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you [the “you” is plural] will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Phil 1)*

Because of the resurrection of Jesus, the church will one day become unimaginably lovely. And the person in the church whom you find the least attractive now will one day share that loveliness.

C. S. Lewis says that if we were at present to see one another as we will one day be, we would be sorely tempted to worship each other. We receive power to be friends when, by faith, we learn to see past the things we don't like to the things that are coming by the power of the Spirit.