**THINGS THAT MATTER MOST - DEVOTIONAL PAPERS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**19. THE FRIENDS OF JESUS by JOHN H. JOWETT**

I SUPPOSE that the greatest title ever conferred upon men was the one used by Jesus when He addressed His disciples as "My friends." Compared with this all other titles and nobilities are tawdry and artificial. They are as wax flowers and fruits in contrast with the sweet-perfumed loveliness of gardens and woods. They are like harsh, glaring stage effects set in contrast with the soft splendours of the dawn. An earthly dignity always carries with it a certain autumnal air, a suggestion of the fading leaf. The heavenly dignity is always significant of the eternal spring and the "never-withering flowers." "My friends." No other honour will ever come our way which for a moment can be compared with this.

Let us for a, moment think who He is who confers the title. He is the "young Prince of Glory," the true expression and the subdued effulgence of God. These are familiar and perhaps well-worn words, and their sovereign superscription may have been partially effaced. Does it still awake the sense of wonder that the Prince of Glory walked the dusty ways of men? I remember reading years ago a quaint little book, written with daring and yet reverent imagination, in which the writer sought to express something of the limitless wonder of the angels when the Prince of Glory declared His purpose to leave the abode of light and enter the shadows and the darkness, that He might redeem the stricken earth-family from their sin. The imagination was certainly daring, but the awed spirit of the writer saved it from transgression, and he certainly conveyed some sense of the wondrous happenings in the unseen world when the beloved Prince set out to befriend the children of men. "The word was with God, and the word was God. All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that hath been made." "He is before all things, and in Him all things consist." And this strong Son of God came to befriend the sons and daughters of men, and to seek their friendship in return. "Ye are My friends."

And upon whom does He confer the title? Well, there is a couple of fishermen among them, James and John. He found them on the shore mending their nets. And there are two other fishermen, Simon and Andrew, also found at their humble toil. And there is at least one tax-collector, picked up at the very booth where the customs' dues were being paid. And there is another man, quiet, deep, and thoughtful, discovered in hungry reveries beneath a fig-tree. And these are types of the men the Prince of Glory gathered about Him. That is the first wonder of it. His friendship crossed all the hoary barriers of sex, and caste, and education, and possession

and in a wide and glorious intimacy He sought and found His friends everywhere, among the learned and the unlearned, the high and the low, the rich and the poor. And the true aristocracy in that day, had it only been recognized, like the true aristocracy in our own day, did we only know it, are those who live in the intimacy of the Prince's presence and who have the rare and radiant distinction to be called His friends.

Let us think a little while upon some of the characteristics of this great friendship; upon some of the distinctive signs of the friends of the Lord. First of all, then, this friendship is characterized by openness of disposition. Some lives are close and closed, and they appear to be almost incapable of friendship. You can never get beyond their doorstep. Their doors are shut, their windows are closed, their blinds are drawn. However long you know them they never let you know anything. Other lives are open to your approach, they open as a flower opens to the gentle siege of the sunshine. These are the people who are capable of friendship. One door after another opens out in the treasury of their soul. You are taken first into the realm of thought, then into the realm of desire and feeling, and then into the innermost room of prayer and praise. Concerning such a soul we say, "I know him through and through." And so it is with the friends of Christ. There is perfect openness between the soul and the Lord. There is openness on the side of the Master. He hides nothing we need to know. "I have set before thee an open door." All things that I have heard of My Father I have made known unto you." "He shall take of Mine and show it unto you." And there must be a similar openness on the side of man. "If any man open the door I will come in and sup with him." There must be no reserve, no sheltered secrets, no private chamber where questionable purpose is hid. The Lord must have the run of the house. He must know all. There must be perfect openness of disposition.

And, secondly, this friendship is distinguished by a responsive sympathy. There must not only be open doors between two friends, there must be sympathetic fellowship. It was asked by a prophet long ago concerning man and his God, "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" If two people walk together they must agree at any rate on two things; they must have a common aim, and they must have a common pace. And the friends of Christ who seek to walk with Him must share His aim, His ends, His goals. They must also keep step with Him and not move either before or behind. We mar the friendship by precipitate haste, and we bruise it by destructive delay. And therefore I say that this high friendship demands a sensitive and responsive sympathy. There must be fellowship in aversions, there must be fellowship in attachments. There must be the same loves and the same hatreds. There must be the same fundamental moral tastes. We must agree on what is bitter, and we must agree on what is sweet. Friendship with the Lord aspires after that wonderful communion which the Master Himself described when He said, "I and My Father are one."

And in the third place this friendship is marked by natural and unreckoned sacrifices. Friendship is never really noble and matured until on both sides it becomes unconsciously sacrificial. Friend must bleed for friend and not see the blood. There are three or four grades of friendship, beginning on an elementary scale which scarcely deserves the name of friendship at all, and rising into a glory of self-abandonment which makes us kinsmen of the Christ. On the lowest stage there is a friendship which only covets personal gain. It is there for what it can make out of you. On this plane friendship is only association. Love has not yet dawned, for the inmost heart and life of love is an impartation of self. On the second grade there is a friendship which gives, and which likes to display its gift. It loves to stand back and admiringly contemplate its own offerings. It is always conscious when it is giving, how it is giving, and the nature and price of its gifts. It is calculating and not spontaneous. It is never unknowingly generous, it is never unrememberingly bountiful, it is never gloriously and forgetfully prodigal of its own blood. It is a friendship which gives and which carefully registers the amount of its gifts.

And thirdly there is the friendship that is unmindful of its sacrifices. This is a glorious type which, while it gives, has all the gracious feeling of receiving. In its sacrifices it is far more conscious of income than of expenditure; indeed, the sense of expenditure is almost altogether absent. "I was hungered and ye gave Me meat." "Lord, when--?" That is a lofty and radiant plane of achievement. Can any relationship be more intimate and gracious than for two friends to be pouring their life into each other and both of them, unconscious of any sacrifice? And yet perhaps there is even a further height on this glorious tableland of being when, in the unconsciousness of sacrifice, one man hungers for a deeper share in the sufferings of his friend. And that is the craving of the Prince of Glory towards you and me. He hungered and hungers to share our sufferings, to enter into our travail. "He bore our sins and carried our sorrows."

In every pang that rends the heart

The Man of Sorrows has a part.

That must be our craving towards our Saviour-Friend. We must aspire to share His sufferings. It must be our coveted privilege "not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake." We must enter into "the travail that makes His kingdom come." We must share His sufferings in fighting ignorance, in warring against wrong, and in proclaiming the evangel of love and grace to wayward and indifferent men. This is the high and priceless privilege of the friends of Christ.

And now I have one bit of counsel to offer to those who are seeking to be the friends of the Lord. Keep your friendship with the Lord in good repair. There is a German proverb which says that "Friendship is a plant that we must water often." It must not be allowed to take its chance. Human friendships have to be tended, for there is no fair thing in the world which can thrive in an atmosphere of neglect. And therefore we must carefully attend to our friendship with the Lord. "Friendship should be surrounded with ceremonies and respects." Yes, even the wonderful liberties of friendship are helped by tender courtesies. So is it respecting our friendship with Christ. We must surround it with ceremonies and respects. I believe there is a way of kneeling, a way of going on one's knees, a way of rising from one's knees, which will enrich the intimacy of our freedom with the Lord. "Oh, come, let us worship and bow down."

And as for the Master's side of the friendship, it cannot be put into words. "He is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother." He loves to make friends of the failure, the bruised, the unfortunate, and him that hath no helper. And He wants to befriend thee and me to-day, in all our sins, in all our sorrows, in all our worries, in all the manifold changes of the ever-changing day.

His friendship transforms every road. Every road unveils spiritual wonders when He walks with us, and blessings abound on every side. The very consciousness of His presence begets a peace which is itself the medium of discernment, and we are able, on the most ordinary road, to know some of "the things that God hath prepared for them that love Him."