

# What is a True Friend?

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## An unusual friend in an unusual place

In 1921, one of the world's worst prisons was called Sing Sing. Even murderers and robbers dreaded to enter that crowded, dark place with its thick walls and high barbed-wire fences. Fights and riots were common. Deaths were frequent.

Twenty years later the prison was a safe place with some of the prisoners reforming and returning to society. Many gave the credit to the prison warden for his wise reforms. He quickly disagreed. "All the changes came because of my wife. She is buried just beyond the prison walls."

She was the mother of three small children. Everyone warned her to never go into the prison. It was too dangerous. She ignored the advice, walking with her children among the prisoners. She taught her children to show kindness. They would give a piece of fruit to one man, a bar of soap or a pretty picture to another.

She asked her husband about the men's criminal records. Finding out that one murderer was blind, she asked him "Can you read Braille?" He didn't know what it was, so she taught him how to use his fingers to read the bumps.

Later, she met a deaf prisoner. She learned sign language and was able to communicate with him and encourage him. Everywhere she cared for the men and spoke hope to them about their futures.

One day the prison warden did not come to Sing Sing prison. The prisoners knew something was wrong. They found out that his wife, their dear friend had died. The next morning they all crowded to the gate begging to go to the prison warden's home to pay respect and honor to her body.

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The prisoners were allowed to go and simply told to check back in that night. Amazing as it seems, that night, every single one of them returned to the prison and checked in. Their gratitude to her for her compassionate friendship strengthened them to be honest citizens again.

## Where Can We Find True Friends?

Do you have a true friend like that lady? If you do, you have a very great treasure. Such friends will sacrifice their time, strength and money to help you. They will be loyal and dependable, ready to forgive you even when you make mistakes.

Most of us do not have such faithful friends. Many of our friends are nice to us only for what they hope to gain. It is easy to wonder who would really care for us if we were really in trouble. How can we find true friends who are more precious than gold?

In an ancient proverb the secret is given. "A man who has friends must himself be friendly, and there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" Proverbs 18:24. According to this proverb we should change our question from "How can we find true friends?" to "How can we be a true friend?" Let's explore more deeply.

## Friendship Quality #1—Self-Sacrifice

During World War II, Adolph Hitler led Germany to kill millions of Jews and invaded many countries in Europe. The country of Canada joined forces with France and others to try and stop Hitler's army. One day, five thousand Canadian soldiers got off their warships to

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fight with the Germans on the coast of France.

Among the five thousand soldiers there was a man named John Hood. He was a religious man who had refused to carry a gun or fight. Still he had chosen to join the soldiers in order to encourage and care for the sick and dying. He also performed religious services for those who died.

During the fighting, John left the safety of the warship to rescue wounded soldiers on the beach as bullets whizzed past his head. He pulled at least thirty men out of the water. He would walk among the dead until he found a man with some life. Then he would load him into a small boat and send him off to the warship. He would continue searching for more wounded, all the while risking his life.

The Canadians were in full retreat and the enemy was marching away with their prisoners. The last rescue boat was headed to the warship. Two soldiers reached out to grab John and pull him to safety. He pulled away from them and jumped into the water, swimming toward the enemy. The Germans captured him and led him off to the prison camps. There he suffered much, but after the war they released him.

When asked why he had fled safety to join the prisoners John answered, "Those who were safe were at peace. Those who were captured needed me more." He spent his time bringing courage and hope to the soldiers in the prison camps.

In this story we see an extremely important quality of a true friend. He will sacrifice his own comfort, safety and happiness for his friends. He does not focus on what he can gain from the friendship, but chooses to give instead.

Have you met anyone like this? Perhaps your mother has sacrificed like this. Since you were a baby she cared for you,

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providing food and clothing, even if she did not have enough for herself. She taught you all she knew, and worked hard to send you to school. Even now she would give anything to help you, even her life.

The world would be such a wonderful place if people were more willing to sacrifice like this for each other. Unfortunately, we usually see the opposite quality—selfishness. People make friends for what they can get from the other person. If their friends can no longer help them, they go elsewhere.

It used to be that neighbors helped each other a lot. If someone went on a hunt and captured a large animal, they returned and shared it with all their neighbors. Now it seems that often families are afraid to give help to anyone outside their home. They seem to think they will not have enough for themselves if they give to others.

There is an ancient proverb that speaks the truth about such thinking. "There is one who scatters, yet increases more; and there is one who withholds more than is right, but it leads to poverty. The generous soul will be made rich, and he who waters will also be watered himself" Proverbs 11:24-25.

Have you seen that this is true? One seller in the market is always trying to get the highest price. She cheats a little on the weights and lies about the prices. After awhile no one trusts her and few buy from her. Another seller does the opposite. He is honest and generous. When he gets a good deal on produce he sells it for a cheaper price to help his customers. Such a generous man is likely to become wealthier, at least in true friends.

We can give many things besides money and possessions. We can give advice to the one who doesn't know what to do. We can give a listening ear to someone who is sad. We can give

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time to our children to play with them and teach them good morals. We can help a widow with some of her housework, not expecting any pay.

A long time ago there lived a teacher in the country of Israel in the Middle East. He traveled from town to town, owning nothing, but giving much. He was known for His compassion to the poor and the sick. People stood for hours listening to His teaching. His name was Jesus. One of His words of wisdom was this, "Unless a grain falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain."

What did He mean? If a grain is only in the sack it stays as just one grain, but when it falls into the earth and begins to rot, new life starts and the result is a whole plant full of grain. Jesus explained His meaning, "He who holds on to his life will lose it. He who gives it away will keep it" (Mark 8:35). He who sacrifices himself to help others actually gains more than he gives away.

Haven't you seen this to be true? What if the top leader in every country, sacrificed his own wealth and power to help his leaders under him? What if he taught each of them to use their positions and money to help the citizens? Wouldn't those countries be greatly blessed and their leaders deeply appreciated?

If you want to have a friend that is self-sacrificing, you must be that kind of friend. How can you become more like that? Here are two simple steps:

Think often about the benefits of being generous with others. Memorize the proverbs above and meditate on how you can bring generosity into every relationship in your life.

Test this truth by sacrificing to help others. See what bless-

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ings come. Remember to be patient as not all blessings come quickly. Here are some examples.

Help your children with their schooling when you would rather watch TV or visit with your neighbor.

Give up your plans for the weekend to help your spouse with something around the house that needs to be done.

Stop and help a neighbor or even a stranger with a problem he or she is having.

## Friendship Quality #2—Faithfulness

Have you noticed the difference between an eagle and a vulture? An eagle chooses her mate very carefully. When mating time comes, the male follows the female. She takes a stick high into the sky and drops it. The male chases it and catches it. Then she takes a larger stick and does it again.

She does this over and over until she is confident that he is a strong and healthy mate. Then the eagles remain together all of their lives.

The vulture on the other hand doesn't care what he eats or with whom he mates. He eats dead animals and has several mates. When we think of beautiful birds we do not value the vulture. Instead we respect and admire the eagle.

These birds illustrate an essential quality of true friendship. An ancient proverb says, "A friend loves at all times and a brother is born for adversity" Proverbs 17:17. True friends remain friends even when there are difficult times.

Wouldn't the world be wonderful if all husbands and wives were faithful to each other? We would not have the problems of AIDS and other sexual diseases. We would not have bro-

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ken hearts and broken homes, with children crying because their parents divorced.

Perhaps you long to have such a friend. Again you must ask yourself, if you are being this kind of friend. Are you willing to be helpful and loyal, even when your friend's circumstances change and he has difficulties?

How can you become a more faithful friend? Try these steps to see how they help:

Think about the benefits of being a faithful friend. Memorize and meditate on the proverbs above.

Test this truth by choosing to be helpful, loyal and forgiving.

Do kind things for your spouse even when he or she is not kind to you. If he or she is no longer healthy, attractive or kind, choose to remain faithful.

Express love to your children and value their good points even if you see many negative qualities.

Choose to forgive your neighbors or even your enemies for their mistakes. Do something kind for them and see how it changes your relationships for the better.

Perhaps you are worried that others will despise you for being so compassionate and self-sacrificing. This is not likely. The most valued animal in all of Asia is the water buffalo. He is not as strong as the elephant. He is not as fierce as the tiger. He is certainly not beautiful. But he is faithful, dependable and constantly ready to serve. He is truly a good friend to the farmer and so highly valued.

This is also true of the greatest people in the world. They are the ones who are remembered and honored. They are self-

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sacrificing and faithful people like Mother Theresa and Gandhi. We should strive to be like them and make our families, our neighborhoods and our world a better place.

Now that you have thought deeply about how to be a good friend and how to find good friends, what will you do? Many people hear good ideas and quickly forget them. It is important that you take some action on what you have heard in order to gain the benefit.

Look again at the two steps under each friendship quality above. Write down some of the proverbs on a piece of paper so that you can see them often. Make a list of kind things you want to do this week as a good friend to others. Begin doing them today!

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## Points to Remember

If we want friends we ourselves must be friendly.

Those who sacrifice their time, resources and help will find blessings returned to them.

Those who are faithful are honored and remembered.

“The generous soul will be made rich, and he who waters will also be watered himself” Proverbs 11:25.

## Questions

1) Underline the sentences that are correct.

Sing Sing prisoners were changed because of the kindness of one lady and her children.

The prisoners came back to the prison because they were afraid of being beaten.

It is foolish to be kind to murderers and thieves.

2) Write T before the true statements and F before the ones that are false.

\_\_\_\_\_ The grain of rice that stays in the sack produces many crops.

\_\_\_\_\_ Those who are generous with others will often have others be generous with them.

\_\_\_\_\_ The man who sacrificed his safety to help the soldiers died a sad life.

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3) Put an “X” before the one answer that is correct.

We should be self-sacrificing and faithful towards:

\_\_\_\_\_ Our bosses

\_\_\_\_\_ Our neighbors

\_\_\_\_\_ Our family

4) Faithfulness would prevent

\_\_\_\_\_ AIDS

\_\_\_\_\_ Divorce

\_\_\_\_\_ Broken hearts of children

5) What are the steps that will help you to be a self-sacrificing friend?

6) What are the steps that will help you to be a faithful friend?

If this statement is true of your choice today, check it:

\_\_\_\_\_ I will choose to meditate on these ideas and proverbs. I will test these truths by being generous, helpful and faithful at my job, in my neighborhood and in my family.