Text: John 15:12-17
Title: Make Friends … Partners for the Journey

INTRODUCTION

Open your Bibles to John 15:12. I'm in a series of messages entitled "Make Friends." In fact, that is our focus for 2007. We need to be challenged to break out of our holy huddles and begin to build relationships with those in our city and our schools and our offices who need to have a personal friendship with Jesus Christ.

> And we saw last week how the most important friendship (relationship) is that relationship with Jesus Christ. That is clear as we read the verses we're about to read. But it's also clear that Jesus had some other "friends" in mind. You see, our friendship with Jesus Christ is not lived out in isolation, but in the vital fellowship we have with other believers.

Read John 15:12-17.

I repeat, our friendship with Jesus Christ is not lived out in isolation, but in the vital fellowship we have with other believers. I know this…

- By the setting of His teaching. Jesus spoke to them in a group and instructed them in the plural. References to "you" are plural. He could have said this to them individually in private, but He didn't. He spoke these words to them as a group.
- By the wording of His teaching. Jesus begins this section by laying out the basis for their friendship with Him.

> **John 15:12 (NIV) - My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.**
>
> **John 15:14 (NIV) - You are my friends if you do what I command.**
>
> **John 15:17 (NIV) - This is my command: Love each other.**

So you really can't just say "I'll be a friend (disciple)of Jesus, but the verdict is still out on my relationship with the church." No! Jesus said, "You are my friend if you do what I command. My command is that you love each other … that you be friends with each other for the journey.

> If Jesus is really a priority in your life, then the church will be a priority in your life.

Note: Jesus doesn't say we are not to love people in the world. He simply says, "There's an order here. Before you can really get serious about your friendship with non-believers, you need settle your friendship with each other."

Unfortunately we don't always behave in our relationships with each other in a way that demonstrates the love of Christ. Sometimes church looks like this

> **ILLUSTRATION –** "For the Birds" Video

Let me lay out for you a few statements that will do two things: One, it will reassure those of you who have been doing the church thing for awhile, and maybe you've asked yourself, "Now why do I need to make church a priority in my life?" Two, it will hopefully convince others of you of the importance of making church a priority in your life.

STATEMENT #1 – The commitment to <u>follow</u> Christ is also a commitment to <u>fellowship</u> with God's people.

It's clear from reading the verses we read in John 15 that Jesus wanted His disciples to live out their discipleship in the relationships with other followers of Christ. They are not to be Lone Ranger Christians.

When a person is saved, it's not just a statement of their new relationship with Christ, but also with the church. There are a great examples of this in the book of Acts.

> **Acts 2:41 - Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.**
>
> Baptism is the Christ-sanctioned initiation into the church.
>
> And this wasn't just being added in name only.
>
> **Acts 2:42 (NIV) - They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.**
>
> **Acts 2:47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.**
>
> **Acts 5:14 Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.**

ILLUSTRATION – I've used this illustration before, but it's like someone telling you they play in the NBA. Which team do you play for? Oh, I'm not on a team, but I'm in the NBA. Ridiculous! The Christian life is a team sport. You can just get out and shoot around in your driveway, but you don't play basketball except on a team.

STATEMENT #2 – The <u>energy</u> of love in the church is the <u>example</u> of Jesus Christ.

Now go back to John 15:12-13.

John 15:12-13 (NIV) - My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. [13] Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

There is to be an energy that pulsates in the circle of believers, and that is the self-sacrificing love of Jesus Christ.

Love each other is a two-way street. I have to be willing to love and to be loved. You can't do that keeping people at a distance.

I realize that many people are disillusioned with the church in general because they've been disappointed by what they've experienced at church.

> **ILLUSTRATION** – Back before Christmas we had a repairman working on something at our house, and as he left I asked him if he had any special plans for Christmas Eve. He said, "Not really." I mentioned that our church was having a Christmas Eve service and that it was always a great experience. He politely said, "Really?" I pressed in a little more. "Do you attend church somewhere here in the city?" The repairman replied, "No, I'm believer, but I don't have much use for the church. I used to be very active in a church, but I saw the meanness of church people and I don't need that."

If that is where you are … disillusioned and disappointed by an experience you had in church some time in the past, you can't let that keep you from involvement in a church. Following Jesus is done with other followers of Christ. Has it occurred to you that rather than running from that experience, that God wants to use that experience, like any other kind of adversity, to strengthen you in your walk with Christ.

But let me say this to all of us as church members. There are so many people out there who don't go to church today because they have been to church, and they've experienced, not the sacrificial example of Jesus' love, but something far less than that in the lives of church members. That simply isn't acceptable!

STATEMENT #3 – The ministry of <u>Jesus</u> in my life happens through the ministry of <u>people</u> in the church (Ephesians 4:16).

Turn with me to Ephesians 4:16 where we get a little more insight into the way this Christ-love works in the church.

> **Eph 4:16 From him** (Jesus) **the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.**

Surface relationships won't do. This love that Jesus calls us to demonstrate to each other is a love for good and for bad. The love that Jesus has for us (agape) is a deep-down healing, freeing love. And that love is to be fleshed out in the way the church functions.

ILLUSTRATION - Journalist and author Bob Greene has a new book entitled And You Know You Should Be Glad: A True Story of Lifelong Friendship. In the book he tells the following story:

> There are a handful of people, during your lifetime, who know you well enough to understand when the right thing to say is to say nothing at all. Those people—and there will be, at most, only a few of them—will be with you during your very worst times….

When, during an already painful juncture in my life, my wife died, I was so numb that I felt dead myself. In the hours after her death, as our children and I tried in vain to figure out what to do next, how to get from hour to hour, the phone must have been ringing, but I have no recollection of it.

The next morning—one of those mornings when you awaken, blink to start the day, and then, a dispiriting second later, realize anew what has just happened and feel the boulder press you against the earth with such weight that you fear you will never be able to get up—the phone rang, and it was Jack.

I didn't want to hear any voice—even his voice. I just wanted to cover myself with darkness. I knew he would be asking if there was anything he could do. But I should have known that he'd already done it.

"I'm in Chicago," he said. I misunderstood him; I thought he was offering to come to Chicago.

"I took the first flight this morning," he said. He had heard; he had flown in. "I know you probably don't want to see anyone," he said. "That's all right. I've checked into a hotel, and I'll just sit in the room in case you need me to do anything. I can do whatever you want, or I can do nothing."

He meant it. He knew the best thing he could do was to be present in the same town; to tell me he was there. And he did just sit there—I assume he watched TV, or did some work, but he waited until I gathered the strength to say I needed him. He helped me with things no man ever wants to need help with; mostly he sat with me and knew I did not require conversation, did not welcome chatter, did not need anything beyond the knowledge he was there. He brought food for my children and, by sharing my silence, he got me through those days.

STATEMENT #4 – My relationships in the church keep me <u>focused</u> and <u>accountable</u>.

Turn with me to …

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV) - And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. [25] Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Involvement in the church is more than just showing up occasionally. It's living actively in relationships with other believers who encourage me to stay faithful and true to my Lord.

I need that accountability serves as a protection in my life.

ILLUSTRATION – I was reading recently that while
the players who grab the most headlines are quarterbacks, running backs, and wide receivers the guys who are really the unsung heroes on a football team are guys who play left tackle. We know the names of the quarterback and the wide receivers and the running backs. But do you know the name of the left tackle of the Dallas Cowboys? (If you do you should get a life!)

> By 2004, the average salary of a left tackle in the NFL was $5.5 million a year. Only starting quarterbacks earned more. The reason the left tackle is so important is that generally quarterbacks are right-handed. The left tackle's main role is to prevent his quarterback from being hit from the blind side.

We all need someone like that in our lives. Do you? I want to challenge you with this:

> Set a goal of having a Christ-centered relationship with at least one other believer … men for men … women for women.

We need the relationships like this in the church to keep us focused and accountable.

STATEMENT #5 – I must continuously <u>monitor</u> my <u>love</u> level.

John 15:17 (NIV) - This is my command: Love (keep on loving) each other.

We all know that our love can grow cold. I have to continuously look at my life to see if I'm living a life of love.

You see, this has everything to do with my growing relationship with Jesus … and what He is doing in my life.

CONCLUSION

I think one of most moving stories in the Bible is the conversion of a Jewish leader by the name of Saul of Tarsus, later to be named Paul the Apostle. He hated Jesus, and the followers of Christ. He harassed the church any way he could. But then one day He came face to face with Jesus Christ on the Road to Damascus. And when Saul was struck down in the presence of Jesus, he heard Jesus ask this question: "Why are you persecuting Me?" Jesus didn't ask, "Why are you persecuting the church?" No, Jesus asked, "Why are you persecuting *Me*?"

You cannot separate Jesus from His church. Your relationship with Jesus and with His church are connected.