



## Was Jesus a Friend of Sinners?

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We read in 1 Corinthians 15:33, *Do not be deceived: 'Evil company corrupts good habits.'* The Greek word rendered “company” means, association, conversation, companionship, intercourse, or communion. We are here taught that evil companionships, or “friendships” with the ungodly, will have a destructive influence on our moral behavior. There is a direct correlation between a person's character and the company he keeps. Few would disagree, even in the unbelieving world, that such is undoubtedly the case. It is, therefore, a common practice among loving parents to forbid their children from being friends with other children whom they think would be a bad influence. Would we expect our heavenly Father to have any less concern for His beloved children and not prohibit them from friendship with sinners? We read in Proverbs 13:20, “*He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed.*” We read in 2 Corinthians 6:14, “*...what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? ...Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?*” If Jesus was a friend and companion of sinners would He not, according to these and many other passages, be living contrary to Scripture and setting a dangerous and perilous example for his followers?

### **The Accusation of the Pharisees**

The Pharisees, seeking to find fault with Christ, were proclaiming, ‘*Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!*’( Luke 7:34) It would make little sense, in light of their intent, to include the charge of being a friend of sinners if it were not generally recognized as being contrary to Scripture. We are told in Proverbs 12:26 that, “*The righteous should choose his friends carefully, for the way of the wicked leads them astray.*” In Proverbs 28:7 we read, “*Whoever keeps the law is a discerning son, but a companion of gluttons shames his father.*” It says in Proverbs 23:19-20, “*Hear, my son, and be wise; And guide your heart in the way. Do not mix with winebibbers, or with gluttonous eaters of meat.*” David says in Psalm 119:63, “*I am a companion of all who fear You, and of those who keep Your precepts*” which is in perfect harmony with what Christ Himself said in John 15:14, “*You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.*” If Christ was in fact a friend and companion of gluttons and winebibbers, tax collectors and sinners, taking pleasure in the comradeship of the wicked, as the Pharisees

were claiming, then He would indeed be guilty of living contrary to the clear teachings of Scripture. However, these were nothing more than erroneous assumptions and exaggerations of what was actually occurring. Jesus tells us in Luke 14:12, 13, “*When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends... But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind*” (emphasis added). In light of this verse, the fact that Christ ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners in no way implies that He was friends with them or guilty of any wrongdoing. The Pulpit Commentary states:

The Pharisees would have been right, enough if Jesus Christ had mingled with the mercenary and the vicious only to enjoy their company....and he would have left an example that would have been better shunned than followed. For to mingle with the irreverent and the covetous, and, still more, to associate with the positively vicious, simply for the sake of passing gratification, is...to incur the serious danger of being lowered to their level. Some intercourse with the frivolous and the guilty we must have, and there is every reason why our conduct toward them should be as courteous and gracious as possible. But no wise man will establish an intimate friendship with another whose spirit is the spirit of worldliness, whose conduct is that from which purity and sobriety must shrink. Let the young especially remember that lifelong association with the unholy and the unworthy, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, means gradual moral degeneracy, continual spiritual decline....Our Lord mingled with publicans and sinners, not as a Companion to share their revelries, but as a Guide to lead them into other and better ways, as a Helper whose strong hand should raise them from the mire and place them upon the rock. <sup>1</sup>

Again, Jesus clearly tells us who His friends are in John 15:14, *You are My friends if you do whatever I command you*. Is this not the very antitheses of the claim, “Jesus is a friend of sinners”? He says, in essence, you are not my friends if you are sinners, i.e., those who do not do what I command them. He says in John 15:15, “*No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you* (emphasis added). James tells us, *Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. And he was called the friend of God*” (Jam. 2:23) (emphasis added). Jesus was not a friend of sinners but rather He came to save sinners, eating and drinking with the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Pulpit Commentary*, Luke 7:34 (Hendrickson Pub, October 1, 1985)

enemies of God that He might bring them the message of reconciliation, the gospel that would indeed give them the opportunity to in fact become His friends.

We read in James 4:4, “*Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*” James does not say a *friend of the world* is a poor Christian but an *enemy of God*! Friendship with the world is to be in collusion with the enemy. Why would a Christian want to be friends with those who stand diametrically opposed to Christ? Who live flagrantly and unashamedly in rebelliousness to His word and are of such character as would resemble those who crucified Him? For, “...*what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? ...Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?*” (2 Cor. 6:14, 15). Saints and sinners walk in two opposite directions. The one walks in the narrow and difficult way which leads to life, while the other walks in the broad way that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13, 14). The one is a slave to righteousness the other a slave to sin (Rom. 6:15-23). The one walks in the Spirit the other in the flesh (Rom. 8:5-8). The two have nothing in common as regards to their core beliefs, interests, and lifestyles. What then would be the basis of such a friendship? According to Scripture there is none.

We are called as Christians to love our enemies, that is, to be charitable, kind, compassionate and “friendly” toward them, but not to affectionately embrace them as friends. This is a love that seeks their best interest, both physically and spiritually; not an emotional attachment to them as intimate friends and companions. Adam Clarke writes, “How strange it is that people professing Christianity can suppose that with a worldly spirit, worldly companions, and their lives governed by worldly maxims, they can be in the favor of God, or ever get to the kingdom of heaven!”<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry writes, “Let us not be joined with ungodly men; but warn all around us, especially children and young persons, to shun them as a pestilence.”<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, we are not called to retreat from society and never associate with sinners otherwise the call to love our enemies, to be the salt of the earth, or to preach the Gospel would be meaningless, but we are warned, “*Do not be deceived: ‘Evil company corrupts good habits’*” therefore, “*Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord*” (2 Cor. 6:17). The Apostle John says that sinners are of the devil (1 Jn. 3:8) and makes this distinction in 1 John 3:10, “*In this the children of God and the children of the devil are*

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<sup>2</sup> *Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, James 4:4, (Abingdon Press, 1966)

<sup>3</sup> *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1 Cor. 15:33, (Hendrickson Publishers, 2009)

*manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.*” To claim that the *children of God* can legitimately be friends and companions with *the children of the devil* would be, in essence, to claim that Christ could be a friend and companion of Satan and to that we would say God forbid! For, “*What harmony can there be between Christ and the devil?*” (2 Cor. 6:15 NLT). As God said in 2 Cor. 6:16-18:

“I will live in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they will be my people. Therefore, come out from among unbelievers, and separate yourselves from them, says the Lord. Don’t touch their filthy things, and I will welcome you. And I will be your Father, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.” (NLT)

Matthew Henry sums it up well:

It is wrong for good people to join in affinity with the wicked and profane; these will draw different ways, and that will be galling and grievous. Those relations that are our choice must be chosen by rule; and it is good for those who are themselves the children of God to join with those who are so likewise; for there is more danger that the bad will damage the good than hope that the good will benefit the bad....We should not yoke ourselves in friendship and acquaintance with wicked men and unbelievers. Though we cannot wholly avoid seeing, and hearing, and being with such, yet we should never choose them for our bosom-friends.

The apostle gives several good reasons against this corrupt mixture.

(1.) It is a very great absurdity, 2 Corinthians 6:14, 15. It is an unequal yoking of things together that will not agree together...What an absurdity is it to think of joining righteousness and unrighteousness, or mingling light and darkness, fire and water, together! Believers are, and should be, righteous; but unbelievers are unrighteous. Believers are made light in the Lord, but unbelievers are in darkness; and what comfortable communion can these have together? Christ and Belial are contrary one to the other; they have opposite interests and designs, so that it is impossible there should be any concord or agreement between them. It is absurd, therefore, to think of enlisting under both; and, if the believer has part with an infidel, he does what in him lies to bring Christ and Belial together.

(2.) It is a dishonour to the Christian's profession (2 Corinthians 6:16); for Christians are by profession, and should be in reality, the temples of the living God - dedicated to, and employed for, the service of God, who has promised to reside in them, to dwell and walk in them, to stand in a special relation to them, and take a special care of them, that he will be their God and they shall be his people. Now there can be no agreement between the temple of God and idols. Idols are rivals with God for his honour, and God is a jealous God, and will not give his glory to another.

(3.) There is a great deal of danger in communicating with unbelievers and idolators, danger of being defiled and of being rejected; therefore the exhortation is (2 Corinthians 6:17) to come out from among them, and keep at a due distance, to be separate, as one would avoid the society of those who have the leprosy or the plague, for fear of taking infection, and not to touch the unclean thing, lest we be defiled. Who can touch pitch, and not be defiled by it? We must take care not to defile ourselves by converse with those who defile themselves with sin; so is the will of God, as we ever hope to be received, and not rejected, by him.

(4.) It is base ingratitude to God for all the favours he has bestowed upon believers and promised to them, 2 Corinthians 6:18. God has promised to be a Father to them, and that they shall be his sons and his daughters; and is there a greater honour or happiness than this? How ungrateful a thing then must it be if those who have this dignity and felicity should degrade and debase themselves by mingling with unbelievers!<sup>4</sup>

God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son, not to His friends, but to His enemies (Rom. 5:10), that they might be reconciled to Him; That they might obtain to the glorious and awesome privilege of truly becoming His friends. This privilege is granted exclusively to his sanctified "sons and his daughters" in Christ. To express the notion to the unbelieving world that "Christ was a friend of sinners," to assign this holy privilege to those who are yet at enmity with Him, is indeed to "*give what is holy to the dogs*" (Matt. 7:6).

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<sup>4</sup> *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1 Cor. 6:14-18, (Hendrickson Publishers, 2009)