

TRANSCRIPT

Reading:

"We, Hermia, like two artificial gods, have with our needles created both one flower. Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion, both warbling of one song, both in one key, as if our hands, our sides, voices, and minds, had been incorporate. So we grew together, like to a double cherry, seeming parted, but yet an union in partition, two lovely berries moulded on one stem, so with two seeming bodies, but one heart." William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream, AD1595.

Ronald Sharp:

Friendship has been an absolutely central relationship in virtually every culture we know of. There's a wonderful book by an anthropologist named Robert Brain called Friends and Lovers, which is a cross-cultural study of friendship. It came out about 20 years ago, and he studies friendship patterns in all kinds of different societies. And there's lots of different shadings even for example, between Australia where you are and America, lots of different shadings of friendship. But some version of friendship seems to have existed in most societies that we're aware of, and I think it's been considered by all kinds of major thinkers to be one of the central issues in the happiness of a human life.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

And that's what we're interested in today. Friendship might sound like a lame subject for a podcast designed to undeceive us on serious subjects. In fact, I said as much when director Mark proposed the topic five or six months ago. But then I lost my best mate. He and I had been wobbling of one song both in one key for more than 40 years, from February, 1980, when we had our first ball on the football field to June, 2021, when he passed away peacefully in my lounge room.

I hadn't consciously reflected much on friendship until Ben died and Mark pushed his favourite subject onto the schedule. But I now think of friendship like breathing. It can animate everything, even if you don't stop to think about it. And when you lose your breath, you know about it. A recent study of 10,000 people who've experienced the death of a close friend found, and I quote, "Significant adverse physical and psychological wellbeing, poorer mental health, and social functioning occurring up to four years following bereavement." We'll put a link in the show notes.

The corollary of course, is that friendship is good for you. The Mayo Clinic in the US says that having significant friendships increases our sense of belonging, boosts happiness, improves confidence and even health. But there's also some evidence that the number of our friendships might be in decline. The 2021 American perspectives survey found that 12% of Americans report having no close friends, 12%. That compares to just 3% in 1990. Back in 1990, 33%, a full third of people, said they could count 10 or more close friends in their life. Now just 13% reckon they have 10 close friends. So what's going on with friendship? And what can we learn from history and literature about the significance of this subject? And why did I never realise before just how much the Bible has to say about friendship?

I'm John Dickson, and I need this Undeception.

Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan Academic's new book, *Still Time to Care; What We Can Learn From the Church's Failed Attempt to Cure Homosexuality*, by Greg Johnson. Every episode at Undeceptions, we explore some aspect of life, faith, history, culture, or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about, we'll be trying to 'undeceive ourselves', and let the truth 'out'.

And if you want to help us get the truth out, we've got to giveaway competition to promote the show. Just head to Apple Podcasts, write a review of Undeceptions, positive or negative, mostly positive, send us a screenshot of what you wrote, and we have a free hardcover copy of my new bullies and saints for the five best written reviews. Producer Kaley will pick the winners, extra points for the Oxford comma. All the details are in the show notes for this episode. Enough marketing, back to friendship.

INTERVIEW BEGINS

John Dickson:

So can you make it less vague for me? Can you give us a definition of friendship? Or is it just one of those things we intuitively know and should move on?

Ronald Sharp:

Dr. Johnson was asked that question when he was writing one of his famous essays about friendship, and he said, "It's like light. It's very difficult to define, but we all know what it is."

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

That's Ronald Sharp. One of the foremost experts on the literary history of friendship. He's Professor Emeritus of English at Vassar College in the State of New York. Before that he was professor of English at Kenyon College. His books focus on poetry, romanticism, John Keats, and friendship.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Ronald Sharp:

I guess I would say it's simply a close personal relationship between non-family members, between people who have not taken any kind of legal action to certify their relationship. Now, that's the crudest definition of friendship, but I think it's been a relationship that almost everybody who's ever written about it has regarded as absolutely fundamental to human flourishing.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

And humans have been writing about it for thousands of years.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Ronald Sharp:

Gilgamesh, the Epic of Gilgamesh is probably one of the earliest. The Chinese have been particularly articulate about friendship. Chinese poetry, poets like Du Fu and Li Bo and Po Chu-i are some of the greatest poets of friendship. Of course in the ancient Greeks, you've got Plato and Aristotle writing at great length about friendship. Aristotle has a whole long essay about it, which has probably been the single most influential account of friendship aside from Cicero's, which came a few years later. But yeah, we see it in almost all myths and folklore as well. But it appears in the philosophical literature in Greece and Rome very early.

John Dickson:

Yes, there's an essay I know of by Plutarch about how to tell a flatterer from a friend.

Reading:

"Just as spurious and mock gold only imitates the brightness and glitter of real gold, so the flatterer seems to imitate the pleasantness and agreeableness of the real friend, and to exhibit himself ever merry and bright, contradicting and opposing nothing. We must not however, on that account, suspect all who praise as simple flatterers. For friendship requires praise as much as censure on the proper occasion. Indeed, peevishness and querulousness are altogether alien to friendship and social life: but when goodwill bestows praise ungrudgingly and readily upon good actions, people endure also easily and without pain admonition and plain-speaking, believing and continuing to love the person who took such pleasure in praising, as if now he only blamed out of necessity." Moralia, Plutarch, AD90.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Plutarch was a Greek philosopher trained in Athens in the first century. He's one of the most humane and inquisitive writers from the ancient world. Probably most famous for his Parallel Lives, where he offers these mini biographies of two significant figures to draw out comparisons and contrasts in their character or achievements. Plutarch was perpetually fascinated by what makes a good life. And he wrote more than 50 essays or pamphlets on ethics, religion, politics, literature, and just life in general. What's interesting though, is that most of what we know about friendship from ancient Rome concerns the usefulness of friends. Friends are trustworthy connections in society. There isn't a lot, at least in the Roman context, on what you might call the grace of friendship, friendship as a gift.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Ronald Sharp:

It seems to me that, that the fundamental quality that defines a friendship is that it's a gift relationship. It's a relationship in which utility is not the issue, getting something from somebody is not the issue. We are used, particularly in 20th century Western societies, to thinking of human relationships in terms of consumer relationships, consuming something, purchasing something. "I'll invest in this relationship so that I can get A, B or C, and what do I want out of this relationship, as we say?" That whole model, that whole sense of what a human relationship is seems to me from the point of view of friendship, to completely misunderstand what friendship entails. You don't treat each other as means to an end. It's

not as though you're investing in a friendship in order to gain certain valuable qualities for yourself and have the investment pay off.

We have a lot of silliness going on in modern therapeutic psychology, which talks about friends as disaster protection, where it's argued that one should always have friends because unpleasant things happen in life and you need people to support you in difficult times. And so it's almost as though, like having a savings account, instead of putting money in your bank for dark times, if you lose your job, you should have some relationships with people that you can count on when you really need them. And it seems to me that that whole way of looking at human relations is completely counter to what friendship is all about.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Professor Sharp is one of the editors of The Norton Book of Friendship. It's an anthology of great literature on friendship, which brings together hundreds of works from many cultures spaced across the millennia. There's poetry, letters, plays, essays, stories, and diaries. We've got Shakespeare, Mozart, Keats, Emily Dickinson, and much more. We'll bring you some of the best before we're done with this episode. The book even includes a section on how friends say goodbye, and this gets very cool.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Ronald Sharp:

The greatest poetry about friendship is written by the Chinese poets, Li Bo and Du Fu and Po Chu-I. Very, very simple poems, often poems about saying farewell. I've been very interested in the whole subject of saying goodbye to friends. And that whole notion of saying goodbye to a friend in the ultimate sense of being with them when they're dying, is something that really has a powerful influence on the whole friendship. It's so precious that you know it can be lost in the blink of an eye.

And the Chinese poets were absolutely marvelous at finding a way to embody in a poem that feeling of precious nature of a relationship, and what it was like to say goodbye to a friend after you were leaving after a weekend together or whatever it was, not sure one friend was setting off on a long journey back to his country. This is by a poet named Du Fu, and it's called, "To Wei Pa, a Retired Scholar." And it's translated by an American poet named Kenneth Rexroth.

The lives of many men are shorter than the years since we have seen each other. Aldebaran and Antares, these are galaxies and sky, "Aldebaran and Antares move as we have. And now, what night is this? We sit here together in the candle light, how much longer will our prime last? Our temples are already grey. I visit my old friends, half of them have become ghosts. Fear and sorrow choke me and burn my bowels. I never dreamed I would come this way, after twenty years, a wayfarer to your parlor.

When we parted years ago, you were unmarried. Now you have a row of boys and girls, who smile and ask me about my travels. How have I reached this time and place? Before I can come to the end of an endless tale, the children have brought me the wine. We go out in the night and cut young onions in the rainy darkness. We eat them with hot, steaming, yellow millet. You say, "It is sad, meeting each other again." We drink 10 toasts rapidly from the rhinoceros horn cups. 10 cups, and still we are not drunk. We

still love each other as we did when we were schoolboys. Tomorrow morning, mountain peaks will come between us, and with them the endless, oblivious business of the world.

John Dickson:

I love it. Wonderful, wonderful

Ronald Sharp:

Friendship is one of the great gifts of life, but it's fragile and precisely because it is so fragile, precisely because it doesn't last forever. I would say that of love too rather than just friendship. The fact that your partner is mortal, and that you're both going to die, and that it could happen tomorrow or in 10 years, is very much tied up with the actual emotion of a friendship.

Reading:

"I loved my friend. He went away from me. There's nothing more to say. The poem ends, soft as it began. I loved my friend." Langston Hughes, the Poem.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

No collection of great literature on friendship can ignore the Bible or so I've learned. It contains loads of stories of exceptional friendship. There's David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, Jesus and John, the beloved disciple. And the wisdom literature of the Bible, that's Job, Proverbs and so on, contains tons of aphorisms to help the wise recognize and maintain true friendship. Here's Job Chapter Six, "Anyone who withholds kindness from a friend forsakes the worship of the almighty." Proverbs 17, "A friend loves at all times, and kinsfolk are born for a time of adversity." Proverbs 27, "Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses." Oh man, that's deep. Proverbs 18, "Some friends play at friendship, but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin."

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Sam Allberry:

Proverbs is probably the place where friendship is talked about the most. And I've seen really helpful studies where people have gone through and collected up all the Proverbs about friendship and then built a sort of understanding and a framework out of that. And it says very, I think it says things that we would be surprised to hear today about the significance and nature of friendship.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

That's my friend, Sam Allberry. Sam's an Englishman and an Anglican minister who now lives and works in the United States as a pastor, author and much sought after speaker. He's written and spoken extensively about the importance of friendship.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Sam Allberry:

The fact that God in the Bible uses friendship as one of the categories for describing his relationship with his people, again, shows us that it's not a trivial thing, it's not an empty thing, and he means something by that.

Reading:

"Jesus said to them, my command is this, love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends for everything that I learned from my father, I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, and so that whatever you ask in my name, the Father will give you. This is my command, love each other." Jesus, the gospel of John, AD 90.

Sam Allberry:

That reference in John 15 is telling because Jesus is actually making a distinction between the kind of relationship he's had with his disciples and where things have now progressed to. And when he, I forget where it is, he says this, but when he talks about, "Greater love hath no man for his friend than this, that he laid down his life for him." It's interesting that when he is talking about the greatest expression of love, Jesus reaches for the category of friendship. He doesn't, in that instance, reach for the category of spouse or marriage as we might expect him to. So I think it's one of those things where I don't want to overplay it and say, "Hey, this is the most important thing in the whole Bible," but it's there more than we tend to realize, and with the significance, I think we overlook to our detriment.

There's a very dominance cultural narrative that basically says that, that marriage and sexual or romantic relationships, that is the real way to find intimacy. We've put all of our eggs in that particular basket. And I think in the church, generally, I think we've accommodated that narrative and we've just decided, "Well, Christian marriage is the basket." And so we've not left much space for other kinds of interaction and relationship. We've made the focus, Christian marriage, I think in a way that's become unhealthy. A, because we've downgraded other forms of relationship that actually all of us need, and B, by doing so, I think we've put pressures on marriage that they're not easily going to be able to bear. And as a consequence we've made churches lonelier for people who are not married, whether that's people who haven't yet got married, or people who are divorced, or widowed, or people like me who've never married. Sometimes it feels like it's very hard to fit into a church family, and we use that terminology, if you're not married and don't have your own nuclear family.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

The modern church isn't alone in elevating some kinds of relationships and downgrading friendship. It's perhaps a generational trend.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Sam Allberry:

I remember when I was a small boy, my great-grandfather was still alive and he came to my school to talk about what it was like being in the trenches in the first world war. And this is aging me considerably. But I remember him talking about the kind of depth of friendships that they had serving together, living together, fighting together in the trenches. And he would speak of that, and I've read other accounts from that period, the kind of language people used then, we would slightly raise an eyebrow out today. But it seemed that they had a healthy way of ... They were having to deal with issues of life and death so you can't keep things at just a superficial level. And obviously months on end in a trench and you don't have other family around so this is all you have to deal with relationally, but it struck me that there was an ability to their friendships then, that I think we have lost sight of in our own time.

Reading:

A soldier reflects that his name will never be engraved on plaque or headstone. *"Now rather thank I God there is no risk, of gravers scoring it with florid screech. Let my inscription be this soldier's disc. Wear it, sweet friend. Inscribe no date nor deed. But may thy heart-beat kiss it, night and day, until the name grow blurred and fade away."* Lieutenant Wilford Owen, To My Friend, 1917.

Sam Allberry:

I think earlier generations had a slightly higher view of friendship than we tend to have. I think we are very casual about the idea of friendship. We've downgraded friendship. Earlier cultures would quite happily speak of friendship in fairly rich and deep and intimate categories. And I think we've so sexualized the idea of intimacy and relationship that we've left very little space for other forms of deep connection, and so we've downgraded everything else in the process.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

The sexualization of intimacy, the sexualization of society in general, might be the enemy of a culture of friendship. More on that after the break.

SPONSOR AD - ZONDERVAN

This episode of Undeceptions is sponsored by Zondervan's new book, Still Time to Care by Greg Johnson. I had a chance to catch up with Greg just a couple of weeks ago.

John Dickson:

Hey Greg, thanks so much for this. In a sentence, if this is possible, what is your book about?

Greg Johnson:

I wrote Still Time to Care to help us move beyond the churches' failed attempt to cure homosexuality, whether that was through ex-gay ministries or whether that was through conversion therapy, by really casting an older Christian vision that was all about not cure, but care for gay people.

John Dickson:

Who should read your book?

Greg Johnson:

But I think a lot of Christians realize that we haven't done a great job loving gay people well. There are folks who know that we can do better and they just need somebody to show them what that looks like. I wrote this because I want people to hear about an older approach to gay people. I want them to hear about CS Lewis and his gay best friend, Arthur. I want them to hear about the 1964 gay sex scandal that almost brought down the Lyndon Johnson presidency in the US, and how Billy Graham interceded to provide mercy. He called the president and begged him to provide mercy to the man at the center.

Greg Johnson:

I want to hear about John Stott talking about how sexual orientation was part of one's identity and their constitution, and it wasn't likely to change. I want people to hear Francis Schaeffer in the 1960s, talking about how Christians have marginalized gay people and how that's both cruel and wrong. Henry Newman, I've always wondered if he was talking about his own homosexuality as a celibate gay priest when he talked about the difference between cure and care. He said, "We can't always cure, but we can always provide care. There's still time to care."

John Dickson:

This is a really important book. Greg himself is gay or same sex attracted or whatever your preferred terminology might be. He loves Christ and chooses to follow what he considers the biblical ethic, that is, that sex only has God's blessing within a marriage between a man and a woman. He's choosing to be celibate. In other words, which is gutsy. His book, *Still Time to Care*, is necessary for our times. It's considered and nuanced, and it's available to order now on Amazon.

SPONSOR AD: ANGLICAN AID

John Dickson:

Adina's father worked hard in a Northern Tanzanian goldmine to earn enough money to send her to school. But in 2018, her father died in a tragic mine collapse. And the task of provide enough money for Adina to go to school fell on her mom. Her mom sells bread and sweets at a local market store in Bunda, a district in the Mara region of Tanzania. But the income from the store is barely enough to feed the family, let alone send Adina to school. And it's circumstances like these that stop girls all over Tanzania from getting an education. Let's redress that.

Anglican Aid has been supporting a secondary school for girls in Bunda since 2013, offering quality education, regardless of economic circumstances. It's a happy and safe environment for girls to live and learn. And with the help of Anglican Aid, Adina was actually able to get back to school and continue her education at Bunda Girls Secondary School, despite everything her family had gone through. You can help girls like Adina to finish school by supporting the work of Anglican Aid. I know these guys personally,

I trust them. So please go to anglicanaid.org.au. That's anglicanaid.org.au to support their wonderful work.

EPISODE CONTINUES

John Dickson:

I want to ask you a tricky question. Has the widespread acceptance in recent years of same sex relationships affected the way people in popular culture think about friendship?

Ronald Sharp:

Sure. It's a big issue and it's been a big issue for a long time. Probably the most interesting treatment of this in literature is *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare's famous play, where Antonio and Bassanio were close friends.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Hey, we're about to read you a short bit of the *Merchant of Venice*, but I've got to say I'm a bit uncomfortable with Shakespeare's comical portrayal of the Jewish money-lender Shylock. We'll put a thing in the show notes where you can read more about it. But hopefully it doesn't interfere with Ronald Sharp's excellent point.

Reading:

In the *Merchant of Venice*. The hero Antonio believes he is about to have a pound of his flesh removed by a Jewish money lender as a penalty for defaulting on a loan that he took out for his friend, Bassanio. *Antonio says, "Commend me to your honorable wife, tell her the process of Antonio's end. Say how I loved you. Speak me fair in death. And when the tale is told, bid her be the judge, whether Bassanio had not once a love, repent, but that you shall lose your friend. And he repents not that he pays your debt, for if the Jew do cut but deep enough, I'll pay it instantly with all my heart." Bassanio replies, "Antonio, I am married to a wife, which is as dear to me as life itself, but life itself, my wife, and all the world are not with me esteemed above thy life. I would lose all, nay, sacrifice them all here to this devil to deliver you."*

William Shakespeare, 1596.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Ronald Sharp:

And there are some question about whether there's some homosexual interest, whether the interest goes beyond just feelings to something more physical. Shakespeare deals with this in a brilliant way. But in modern times, particularly in the last 50 years as these issues have moved to the center of our culture, it has complicated things a great deal.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

The church is probably partly to blame here as well.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Sam Allberry:

Just as our culture has made sexual intimacy the kind of all encompassing telos of human relationships and so on, I think in the church, what we've tended to do is to become so hyper suspicious of inappropriate intimacy that actually we've made it harder for people to have a healthy intimacy. And so, I think we share this, some of this even with unbelieving non-Christian friends around us, that actually you see any form of intimacy and you're tempted to think that's probably sexual ultimately. And I think I see that in our society, I was actually listening to an undergraduate student yesterday, talking about David and Jonathan in the Old Testament and referencing David's comment about how Jonathan's love meant more to him than that of a woman.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Sam's referring to maybe the Bible's most famous friendship, between the prince Jonathan and the then shepherd boy, David. When they met for the first time after David famously killed the giant warrior, Goliath, the Bible records, "Jonathan became one in spirit with David and he loved him as himself." Their friendship spans more than a decade and many life death encounters until finally, Jonathan is slain alongside his father Saul during a battle with the Philistines.

Reading:

"David took up this lament concerning Saul and his son, Jonathan, and he ordered that the people of Judah be taught this lament of the bow. A gazelle life slain on your heights, Israel. How the mighty have fallen. Mountains of Gilboa, may you have neither dew nor rain, may no showers fall on your terraced fields. For there the shield of the mighty was despised, the shield of Saul no longer rubbed with oil. From the blood of the slain, from the flesh of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan did not turn back, the sword of Saul did not return unsatisfied. Saul and Jonathan in life they were loved and admired, and in death they were not parted. They were swifter than eagles. They were stronger than lions. How the mighty have fallen in battle. Jonathan lies slain on your heights. I grieve for you, Jonathan, my brother, you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women." The second book of Samuel Chapter One.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Sam Allberry:

And she said very understandably, very instinctively, "That just sounds very gay to me." And a lot of people within the church would share her conviction, because we're so used to any kind of intimacy and expression of love being within a romantic or sexual context that we've squeezed out the ways in which we can actually enjoy those things in a way that has nothing to do with sex and romance at all. So I think

we've made it harder to, actually to have good friends because we're reading sexuality into places where it needn't be a feature.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

The friendship of David and Jonathan isn't the only one that modern commentators sometimes sexualize. There are two Egyptian nobles from 4,000 years ago who are depicted together on a tomb wall. Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were in fact buried together, and the tomb images show them embracing face to face in a perfect mirror image sequence. Now, if you go to Wikipedia, you'll read that this suggests they are the first same-sex couple ever to be depicted, but both guys also have wives and children in the various scenes. It's unlikely they were lovers. A major recent review of the world scenes by Macquarie University, Egyptologists, Linda Evans and Alexandra Woods, concludes that they were in fact, identical twins viewed in ancient Egypt as metaphysically one person. Our instinct to eroticize these guys says more about us than ancient Egypt.

Or there's Richard the Lionheart of Third Crusade fame. Now some have suggested that he was the lover of King Philip II of France because records say they occasionally shared a bed. But professor of medieval history, John Gillingham says, "That's rubbish. 800 years ago, sharing a bed was an accepted political act," but that doesn't stop the internet providing rich speculation that this was indeed a homosexual relationship.

Some have even suggested the same about Jesus. In an article in the UK Guardian, Anglican priest, Paul Oestreicher, connects the fact that Jesus was unmarried with the mention that John was known as the beloved disciple. And so he concludes, "The evidence that Jesus may have been what today we call gay is very strong." This is nuts as a historical statement. It's strong evidence only of the modern tendency to sexualize intimacy. It can't be that Jesus was single like other Jewish prophetic figures we know about. It can't be that Jesus had a best friend like so many of us do. It has to be some suppressed evidence of same sex romance.

I think the same is true across the sexes, actually. Jesus relationship with Mary Magdalene, for example, he just felt profound warmth and respect for Mary, there had to be some romance. The two of them had to be secretly married or whatever. Our culture is dumb. It may be true that previous societies suppressed sex and romance. Personally, I don't think that's true nearly to the extent we imagine, but let me concede it for the sake of the argument. My point is, we have the reverse problem. We romanticize and sexualize everything. And one of the results is that the grace of friendship is demoted and diminished. Here endeth the lesson.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

John Dickson:

There's a peculiar tradition of same-sex friendship in Australia. It's usually called mateship and Professor Sharp, though an American, has some thoughts on it.

Ronald Sharp:

The whole Australian tradition of mateship, for example, came out of the founding of the country first with the penal colonies and then with the settling of the wilderness, where men would go out in groups of two or three, two or four, to settle a very wild place. And they had to work together very closely. There were issues of survival that were at stake. There were violent threats to their lives and to their livelihood by just the question of finding food, and so these people had to work together and they became, as we say, mates. They were looking out for each other. And then suddenly that morphed into an Australian conception of friendship.

Reading:

"We learnt the creed at Hungerford, we learnt the creed at Bourke. We learnt it in the good times, and learnt it out of work. We learnt it by the harbour-side and on the billabong: "No matter what a mate may do, a mate can do no wrong!" He's like a king in this respect, no matter what they do. And, king-like, shares in storm and shine, the Throne of Life with you. We learnt it when we were in gaol, and put it in a song, "No matter what a mate may do, a mate can do no wrong!" They'll say he said a bitter word, when he's away or dead. We're loyal to his memory, no matter what he said. And we should never hesitate, but strike out good and strong, and jolt the slanderer on the jaw. A mate can do no wrong!" Henry Lawson, Interlude, 1915.

Sam Allberry:

It's endearing. And certainly in the UK where I'm from, we have a sort of equivalent thing.

John Dickson:

That's back to my mate, Sam Allberry.

Sam Allberry:

We don't use the word mate as much for it. But I think our view of friendship would be quite similar. They can be the people that, these are your guys, this is your team, like you said, you'd step in front of a bus for them. And you can have that kind of friendship for decades, and many people do. But you might not necessarily know the real depth of what's going on inside each other's lives. That's a different kind of thing. And so mateship is, it's real, it's honorable, it's great.

I wouldn't necessarily say it's a form of intimacy, because if intimacy is being really deeply known and accepted at the same time, actually that's quite a rare thing. And we can have a lot of friendships, even long term friendships where it's not necessarily on a heart to heart level, and where it can even become awkward if someone is trying to introduce that element. And so we need mateship, that's part of what makes the world go round, and it's a social lubricant. But I think we need more than that. More than just that.

John Dickson:

There's this famous scene in Crocodile Dundee where Paul Hogan calls the Outback pub where he's from New York and says good day to various people. And then he's introduced, we're introduced to a

character called Donk, who's his mate, and his mate wants to say, hello and send him his love. And he famously gets on the phone and goes, "Mick, get stuffed."

Movie Excerpt:

Yeah. [inaudible 00:40:07] sends love. Wait a minute, Donk wants to have a word with you.

Mick, get stuffed.

John Dickson:

That's all and then he puts the phone down. I know Australians totally love that. In fact, I must admit, I say to my best mate, get stuffed, all the time as a substitute for, I love you.

Ronald Sharp:

The whole idea of mateship in Australia I think confounded with this utilitarian sense of, we have each other's backs. I have a mate, I have somebody that can count on if there's a disaster to save me or protect me or help me get through something with the very real feelings that did emerge among these people. And then in, as Australian history developed, the whole idea of mateship got very much associated with national identity. It was something unique to Australia.

John Dickson:

Yeah. I don't mean to take this dramatically personal, but four weeks ago I lost my best mate to cancer. And he and his wife lived his last six months in our home in a living room over there, and it's got me thinking, with his passing, is it possible to have new, deep friendships like that? He was my best mate since we were 10 years of age. And to have him no longer here is just quite disorienting, and has made me think, "Well, is that it? I can never have that depth of friendship again." What do you think, is it possible to create new friendships as a 50-year-old?

Ronald Sharp:

I think it's possible. It's very hard. The fact that you had a friend from the age of 10 years old, I have a couple of very old friends from the time I was seven years old who I'm still friends with, two of them died recently and one of them is still alive. And there's something there with all those years and growing up together that can't be replaced. Growing up together, there is a kind of bond that's formed, they understand parts of you from your early childhood on that nobody else could get later. And I think that's something to really treasure.

And I'm sorry for your loss. I can only imagine. I know what it was like to lose my very close friends from childhood. But friendship is an amazing discovery, and it happens sometimes in the most accidental way when you're not looking for it. My own sense is that it isn't the kind of thing you look for. You can have an inclination after your friend dies of saying, "I really loved that relationship and I'd love to have another one like that and try to cultivate things," but a real friendship, the kind that really matters at that level has to develop in natural way.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Without friends, Sam Allberry reminds us, we lose something much more precious than simply someone who has our back. Obviously sociologically we'd lose because unless people are looking after you, you practically lose things, but do you think there are more profound things that you lose if you don't have intimates?

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

Sam Allberry:

I think so. I've seen marriages implode because they were looking just to the spouse to fulfill every relational and emotional need in their lives. And I think there's a complexity to us whereby actually one other person is not going to be enough. And it's no slight on a wonderful spouse to say, "Actually I need friends alongside my marriage, not in place of it, but alongside it to augment it."

Some of my, most of my closest friends are married, and it's interesting when I'm arranging getting together with them, it might be their wife who actually gives them the real shove out of the door and says, "Actually, you need some time with just you and Sam or you and the guys or something," because again, we are complex creatures. We're not going to have all of those relational needs met in just one dimension of relationship.

And I think the biblical wisdom anticipates this, the book of Proverbs says a lot about friendship and suggests that it's actually a key component to living wisely in God's world is to have friends, is to have people who do journey through life with you, who do really know you, who you can share things with and have that support. So I think we would actually end up with a relationally impoverished way of living if we didn't have real friendship.

John Dickson:

One of the criticisms thrown at Jesus of Nazareth, by the religious elite, was that he was a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. So for them, that was not a good thing. One wonders if Jesus saw it as a compliment, even though it wasn't intended as that, but what do you make of that concept, Jesus as the friend of sinners?

Sam Allberry:

As a Christian, I'm dependent on it. If he's not the friend of sinners, I have no hope. But I think more than that, it tells us a lot about Jesus himself. We know from the gospel accounts that he dined with tax collectors, not as a one off, not as in a token outreach way, but actually they seemed very drawn to him. So Jesus seemed to be able to eat with people, to genuinely enjoy the company of people without necessarily affirming and agreeing with everything about what they did.

And similarly, he could disagree with people without having to reject them. And I think we've lost, again, we've lost that kind of nuance in our own dealings with things today. We're so used culturally to thinking, "Well, friendship means you have to agree with me, and if you don't agree with me, you can't be my friend. If you don't affirm me, you're not my friend," kind of thing. Whereas with Jesus, we see him being a genuine friend to tax collectors, but not in a way where he's affirming things about them that were

clearly immoral. So the friendship of Jesus, he doesn't wait for us to be up at his moral level before he extends friendship. But wonderfully when he does extend friendship, it does change us.

One of the features of a friendship that every parent knows watching their kids is that your friends rub off on you, and that's why parents care about who their children are friends with. And the friendship of Jesus rubs off on his friends. So he doesn't become more like the tax collectors, they end up becoming more like him. So I think there's, again, it's a beautiful picture. And as you say, it was a term of derision that actually became a term of honor, I think. And I suspect, and I speak for myself here, it's something I'm not as likely to be accused of as I should be.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

This brings us back to something I said near the beginning, something that isn't talked about much in the Roman world of Jesus today, but plenty of other cultures did revel in it, and Jesus embodied it. It's the grace of friendship. The character of friendship, not so much as useful or necessary, but friendship as pure gift. CS Lewis captured it well.

Reading:

"In a circle of true Friends each man is simply what he is: stands for nothing but himself. No one cares twopence about anyone else's family, profession, class, income, race, or previous history. Of course, you will get to know about most of these in the end. But casually, they will come out bit by bit, to furnish an illustration or an analogy, to serve as pegs for an anecdote; never for their own sake.

"That is the kingliness of Friendship. We meet like sovereign princes of independent states, abroad, on neutral ground, freed from our contexts. This love, essentially, ignores not only our physical bodies, but that whole embodiment which consists of our family, job, past and connections. At home, besides being Peter or Jane, we also bear a general character; husband or wife, brother or sister, chief, colleague, or subordinate. Not among our Friends. It is an affair of disentangled, or stripped, minds. Eros will have naked bodies; Friendship naked personalities.

"Hence, if you will not misunderstand me, the exquisite arbitrariness and irresponsibility of this love. I have no duty to be anyone's friend and no man in the world has a duty to be mine. No claims, no shadow of necessity. Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art, like the universe itself, it has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival." CS Lewis, The Four Loves, 1960.

John Dickson:

The thing that strikes me about the friendship that I've lost with Ben is the beauty of being known through and through with no judgment. It's one of the very few relationships in my life where there's no performance anxiety. You're never trying to be funnier than you are, smarter than you are, it's just because you are completely known, it's so comfortable.

Ronald Sharp:

There's no play acting and you know each other better than you know yourself. And I think that's really true. Those friendships can't be replaced in that regard.

Sam Allberry:

One of the things I've loved about being single is having more of a capacity for friendship than I otherwise would have had. And so while I may not experience the same depth of intimacy that many of my married friends do, but I get a breadth of intimacy that they might not have. Two of my best friends are here where I'm staying at the moment in Nashville, and they're both pastors.

One of them is in his, he's 71, the other one is 37, 38, I'm 45, and yet the three of us are very tight. We meet together every Monday afternoon for a couple of hours, really just to, we call it walking in the light after 1 John 1:7, but it really is just trying to be transparent with each other. We're wanting to let each other in on what's actually going on in our lives. So we confess sins to each other, we share struggles and hopes and fears. And I always know what I ought to share with them because it's the very thing I don't feel like sharing with them. And that's how I gauge, "What do I need to tell Ray and TJ about? Well, it's the thing I feel like I don't want to."

So it's a gift having friends that you can be that honest with. And I've had some deep friendships over the years that I'm very grateful for, but it's lovely having two guys where the three of us are very committed to honesty. And we're therefore, I feel completely known by these guys. There's nothing I don't feel like I can't share with them. There's a safety and a security in that. It's always a little bit nerve-wracking if you feel like there's something particularly vulnerable you need to share, but then when all of you are doing that, when that's a mutual thing, it actually really deepens your sense of friendship.

John Dickson:

It's a lovely expression, isn't it? To be known by someone. We often think, in terms of, "Oh, I really know that person well," but there is, you can be so relaxed when you are known through and through. I often find that I have only a few people where I feel they know me so well I am under no performance pressure to appear more godly than I am, appear more smart than I am. I'm just the jerk that I am and it's awesome.

Sam Allberry:

It really is. It's liberating, isn't it? Because there is an exhaustion that comes with performance and with pretense, and you can't avoid an element of performance in this world because of the way it is. But you need somewhere where you can just exhale, and not constantly be monitoring how you're coming across or what they might think of you or being your own PR agent. And it's what we were made for in Genesis Two, Adam and Eve were naked and without shame, there's a sense there of not feeling vulnerable being open to others, whereas in the world we live in, we are vulnerable. And so it's-

John Dickson:

The opposite of a Facebook friend.

Sam Allberry:

Yeah. We have to constantly cover, and spin, and filter, and it's a truly blessed relief when you find people that actually you can just, they know the best and the worst about you, and therefore you're not

going to surprise them on your best days or your worst days. And they still stick around, which is amazing.

John Dickson:

Well, you've proved my director correct, that wasn't a lame conversation at all. Sam, thanks so much, mate.

Sam Allberry:

My pleasure. Thank you, friend.

John Dickson:

Get stuffed.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

Check out the show notes for this episode and the others over at undeceptions.com, which is fast becoming a treasure trove of free print audio and video material designed to deceive and let the truth out. And while you're there, write or record a question and I'll try and answer it later in the season. And if you're in the mood to support Undeceptions, there are three things you can do. Click the donate button and help us break even one day, buy a t-shirt and spread the word, or go over to Apple Podcasts and leave a review. Apparently reviews do magical things to our ratings.

Next episode, fasten your seat belts, tray is in the upright position, we're heading into outer space. We're talking to astrophysicists and astronauts, one of each anyway, and we are pondering what the discovery of life on other planets might mean for faith, the universe and everything. See you.

CREDITS

Undeceptions is hosted by me, John Dickson, produced by Kaley Payne and directed by Mark Hadley. Editing by Richard Hamwi. And a shout out to all our voice-over artists for this episode. Maya Hadley, Pete Steadman, James Lewis, Yannick Lawry, Laura Doust, Michael Jensen and Megan Powell du Toit: it's so nice to hear your voices on the show. Special thanks to our series sponsor Zondervan for making this Undeception possible.

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