

# Jesus is friends of who?

In our look at Gospel basics, we will be considering many words we hear used in reference to the “Gospel” call. I believe you will be shocked to find how many words the evangelical community has adopted that aren’t in the Scripture in the manner currently used.

For this lesson, I wanted to consider a phrase Christians use. When I hear it, it bothers me because of who they are unwittingly quoting. The phrase is the ever-popular, “Jesus is a friend of publicans and sinners.” In coming to a Biblical understanding of this phrase, we will take a walk through the New Testament considering numerous passages referring to “friend”.

Because of misuse of the above mentioned phrase of, “Jesus being a friend of publicans and sinners,” the Gospel has suffered a subtle twisting in the hands of many sincere, true, Bible-believing Christians.

The Greek word translated “friend”, in the following passages, is based on the root word “*philos*”. It is a word for a brotherly love. It carries the hope of wishing the one who is the friend well. It carries the meaning of an associate or companion.

## Source passages for “friends of publicans and sinners” quote

The expression is found twice in Scripture. Seeing how often it is quoted today, I suspect you expected it was used more frequently. The two passages are in the Gospels, and are quotes of the same thing:

*16 But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, 17 And saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented. 18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say,*

*He hath a devil. 19 The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children. Matthew 11:16-19*

*31 And the Lord said, Whereunto then shall I liken the men of this generation? and to what are they like? 32 They are like unto children sitting in the marketplace, and calling one to another, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned to you, and ye have not wept. 33 For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine; and ye say, He hath a devil. 34 The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners! Luke 7:31-34*

Pause for a moment and consider, “Who was using the phrase about Jesus, ‘a friend of publicans and sinners?’”

The passages tell us. They were the men, women and children of that generation who mocked both John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Christ. When Jesus was quoting them, He was quoting the phrases of his enemies. Ah, such a phrase would have been born in the heart of a poisoned Pharisee or lawyer. We do not find any trace of agreement with their insults from other passages. The apostles never used it in reference to teaching something of the traits and behavior of Jesus.

## Though it is a quote of enemies, isn’t it still the truth?

An objection might immediately arise of, “What about John 3:16? God so loved the world didn’t he?”

How true that is, but we must realize that the “love” God has for the world

is not the “*philos*” love of friendship. It is the “*agape*” love of an unmerited grace. The two are very different and definitely carry a different implication, for how God will ultimately have to deal with each and every person on earth. God has offered his “*agape*” love to all at the present time, but the time is coming when the redeemed will only be comprised of those who also know His “*philos*” love. That is a very serious thing we need to realize.

## What Jesus Himself said about who were His friends

Let’s stop listening to the mockers of Jesus and turn our ears and understanding to what He said about who He considered His friends:

*12 This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. 13 Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. 14 Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. 15 Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you. John 15:12-15*

A starting point on these verses is to note Jesus is telling His disciples to “love” each other. The word used is “*agape*.” That other word for love I briefly mentioned. From that, Jesus switches to the use of the word for “*philos*” love, brotherly friendship.

Jesus is teaching the disciples their “*agape*” love is to be manifest toward the brethren in dying to themselves for another’s sake. (I am barely touching the great weight of these verses.)

Notice what Jesus said in verse 14, “Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.” That is some heavy

material. Does it sound like Jesus is confirming the teaching that His friends are publicans and sinners? I must say that only if the publicans and sinners turned, like Matthew and one of the Marys who followed Jesus did, would it be right to say He is their friend. With what we find here, Jesus made it clear He is not, “a friend of publicans and sinners” like the mockers were calling Him.

## Note a couple revealing references to friends

In the following verse, we see Jesus talking true friendship with His friends. It is the kind of talk you would expect with those walking obedient to Him:

*4 And I say unto you my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. Luke 12:4*

Again, if you are familiar with Lazarus and his two sisters, Martha and Mary, you will know they were followers of Jesus. They were His disciples. That is why we find such a term of affectionate relationship here:

*11 These things said he: and after that he saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep. John 11:11*

## Some weighty words from James on the subject

The following passage has been hard for many to swallow. In fact, the general “Baptist” view I encountered growing up was always trying to explain this passage away. They preferred to avoid it if possible, lest someone get confused. No, it does not teach salvation by works, but it definitely makes it clear that someone who lacks the works is really no true believer at all.

My point here is we need to pay attention to the “friend” aspect. We see from these verses that a friend of God is one who obeys Him. That is what we saw in John 15, remember? The following verses connect a true faith with works and with friendship with God:

*21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? 22 Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? 23 And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. 24 Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. James 2:21-24*

The passage we just read, sheds light on something I said earlier, “the time is coming when the redeemed will only be comprised of those who also know His “philos” love.” This passage in James explains why this is so. Only those with true saving faith are His friends. Without that saving faith, we will all perish.

A little further in the epistle of James we find:

*4 Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God. James 4:4*

Realize, to be at “enmity” is not to be in the position of friendship. From this verse we see it detailed that unrepentant publicans and sinners ARE NOT the friends of God.

## The apostle John carried through the meaning of friends

In a concluding salutation of the apostle John, we see a reflection of his understanding of friendship being at the heart of Christian fellowship. This is his vocalizing of the instruction Jesus gave to His disciples we read in John 15:12-15.

*14 But I trust I shall shortly see thee, and we shall speak face to face. Peace be to thee. Our friends salute thee. Greet the friends by name. 3 John v.14*

## Let this truth sink in and affect our living and preaching

Earlier I said that calling Jesus the friend of publicans and sinners has had a subtle twisting effect on the Gospel, *not to mention the slandering of Jesus!*

You may ask, “What kind of twisting does it have on the Gospel, per se?” Answer: It destroys one’s understanding of the holy character of God. It destroys the fear of God. It also teaches newborn converts to continue old friendships with the ungodly. Such a teaching in itself will often destroy a newborn convert. Stronger ones might see they simply can’t continue those old friendships. It simply won’t work! They will also see their old friends won’t want to hang around them if they start truly living and walking in the fear of God. There are always the exceptions, but the principal is that they won’t like them because they convict them. For an unrepentant sinner, that won’t be a pleasant thing!

As messengers of the Gospel to the unregenerate, we need to take serious consideration to the phrases and terms we pick up and use. We need to examine how such a perversion, as this quote of Jesus’ enemies, has affected our understanding of the Gospel. How has it affected our understanding of the holiness of God? How has it affected our personal fear of God? Further, are we embracing as friends the unregenerate sinners, or are we doing as Jesus really did with the publicans and sinners:

*16 And when the scribes and Pharisees saw him eat with publicans and sinners, they said unto his disciples, How is it that he eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners? 17 When Jesus heard it, he saith unto them, They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Mark 2:16-17*

Remember, a true doctor is supposed to tell you what is destroying you. If your doctor neglected to tell you about the cancer he saw, what a criminal you would have to consider him!



Free to copy under CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 Copyright 2011 by Darrell Farkas

The English version used is from the King James Bible.

To find this article on-line go to [www.basedintheword.org](http://www.basedintheword.org) entitled “Gospel Basics - Part 2: Jesus if friends of who?”