

Facebook: a Revolution in "Friends"

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[0 : 00] Well, let's pray together as we come to God's Word. Heavenly Father, by your Spirit, please open our eyes and our ears and soften our hearts and speak your transforming Word into our lives, we pray, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. February the 4th, 2004 was an enormously significant date, for that was the day when Mark Zuckerberg, then a Harvard student, launched what was then called The Facebook, an online network of relating for Harvard students. Within two weeks, demands were coming in from all over the Boston area, from other schools to have access. Within four months, Facebook had added 30 more college networks. That summer, he went to California for the summer, as you do, and stayed there, developing the concept. Millions of people were added to Facebook. That year, another social network, Friendster, offered to buy Facebook for \$10 million. In autumn 2005, it opened up to high school students, and then work networks. And then in autumn 2006, to anyone with an email address that year, two years after starting, Yahoo offered to buy it for a billion dollars. By the autumn of 2007, it was adding a million new users per week. In April 2009, it had 200 million users. In 2010, that had doubled to 400 million. Now in 2018, over 2 billion people, that's 28% of the population of the world, use Facebook every month. And 1.5 billion, sorry, 1.4 billion. Nearly one person in five logs onto Facebook every single day. In the UK, over half of the population does Facebook every day. Welcome to the second in our series about the online life, the gospel, the human condition, and the online world. Today, we're talking about friendship online. You'll find it very helpful to have your Bible in your hand. We're touching down at various points this morning. And an outline is in the notice sheet, and that will reassure you that we're making progress. And it will also give you the passages we're looking at. So if you want to refer to them in more detail later on, you can do that. Facebook is a great place to start talking about online friendship because it epitomizes the online thing for so many people. And of course, it's not the only social network out there. YouTube and WhatsApp have 1.5 billion subscribers each. Facebook Messenger, 1.3 billion. WeChat, 980 million. Instagram, 813 million. And I could go on. Social networking is one of the most dramatic developments in our world in the last few years, in fact, ever.

And it's all about friends. For those of you who don't know about Facebook, don't know about Facebook? How is it possible to be a living, breathing human being without Facebook? Let me assure you, the people around the room who don't know what Facebook is have just as much fun in life as you do. For those of you who don't know about Facebook, Facebook is a social networking site. It's a place for friends.

[4 : 02] It is possible to have friends and not be on Facebook. But if you want Facebook friends, you sign up to Facebook, you set your page up, you look for your friends who are also on Facebook, and you let them know that you want to be their Facebook friend.

And they say, oh yeah, okay. And then you get a little message back saying that you want to have Facebook friends. And then you chat to each other in bits of text or pictures or little videos. You tell them what you're doing. You show them things you're interested in and so on.

You just relate. The average user has probably around 250 friends. I have 10. Friendship is big online.

But one wonders sometimes whether more is less. 250 online friends. But would you say that on the whole, this was an age characterized by confidence in the realm of friendship.

Confidence that one is known and loved by other people. By a sense of security in relationship with other people. By a sense of purposefulness in relating to other people.

[5 : 10] For all our relating, do we know anyone better? And are we better known? My impression is that knowledge of self and others is rather more elusive than we might like it to be.

And online relating rather more superficial than we might like. Two examples both given to me by the same good friend. First, her observation of another friend.

Someone who was regularly up till 4 or 5 a.m. on Facebook. Just chatting. Unable to put it down. For fear that something important might be missed.

Or that they might be perceived to be being rude. There's something deeply insecure about that, isn't there? And of course, there's growing evidence of damage in social networking.

Jeremy Hunt in a letter this morning in the Sunday Times to social media providers and others demanding action to cut underage use and control cyberbullying.

[6 : 17] And promote healthy screen time writes this. I fear that you are collectively turning a blind eye to a whole generation of children being exposed to the harmful side effects of social media prematurely.

My friend's other observation about online relating was this. That it was almost impossible to pursue friendship because of two things.

One, the sense that other people are always looking on on your relationships, which she found inhibiting. And second, the huge sense of guilt that she felt that she had not responded to all of those people who repeatedly talked to her online.

Once upon a time, old friends exchanged Christmas cards once a year. Now they have to talk all the time because they can.

Just as TV news brings you into contact with more human suffering than you can possibly interact with meaningfully as a human being. So the online community brings you into contact with more individuals than you can possibly be friends with properly.

[7 : 31] It's very difficult to be more than superficial. And what is a friend anyway? My friend. What does that signify?

The impression I get these days is that the commonest use now of that term is just someone who knows me. Someone with whom I've had a conversation. Someone who talks to me from time to time.

Somebody has asked the question, if I'm friends with everybody, am I really friends with anyone? My impression is that there's much more talk and much less depth.

More information. Less understanding. More interaction. Less knowledge. Who do you know? And who knows you? The Bible, along with many other voices in the world, indicates that human friendship, though often superficial, can be deep and sustaining.

Proverbs 18. A man of many companions may come to ruin. But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Acquaintance and friendship are very different things.

[8 : 44] So what might true friendship look like? Well, one of the issues we faced last week is that since the fall, we human beings have a tendency to hide from one another.

Look at the verses that were read to us earlier on. Please turn to Genesis chapter 3. Look at what happens after that first sin.

Verse 7. Verse 8.

Because I was naked. So I hid. And he said, Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?

The man and the woman cover up physically. In front of one another. And in front of God. And that's a symptom of being estranged from God.

[10 : 07] And from one another. And estrangement. And estrangement. That is most cutely felt. When we relate face to face with one another. Our sin makes it deeply uncomfortable to be known as we are.

And especially face to face. And so there's a big difference between the people we are and the people we would like to be perceived as.

And because being face to face as we are is difficult. Our face to face relationships are often driven not by what we are. But by what we want to be seen to be.

And one thing that we're going to explore this time is the issue of image. In Genesis chapter 1 verse 26 we read these striking words. Let us make mankind in our own image.

In our likeness. So that they may rule over all the creatures in the world. Originally we were made bearing the image. The mark. The imprint. The stamp.

[11 : 12] Of our creator. Made to be his representatives in his world. And among other things I take it that means. That had we been able to see them in action back then at the beginning.

Getting on with what God had given them to do. We would have said look at them. Look at how they operate. The way they're working has got the fingerprints of the living God all over it.

Now of course since Genesis chapter 3 all of that has changed. The image of God as we confessed earlier on. Has been corrupted in us. Marred in us.

Not absent anymore. But spoiled. You look at us in action. And you see no matter where you look. Both shining brilliance. And often hidden deep down.

Real darkness. There's a lot of hiding going on in the world. Trying to cover up the darkness within. And project a different image to the world.

[12 : 16] The person I would like to be. The person I'd like others to think of me as. Now that's something we know face to face well enough. But it's accentuated in the online world.

Face to face. We're often guarded with one another. There are things we don't want to give away. Sometimes we're quite proactive. There are things we want to project.

And that possibility is enlarged massively in the online world. Indeed. When life is going badly on the online world.

People often stop relating. How many posts on Facebook have you seen. From people who admit that their life is going really badly at the moment.

No. It's uncomfortable to be known as the person who is no longer living the dream. Of course face to face. People see things that we would rather they hadn't seen.

[13 : 17] But online they don't. And so online we can present ourselves. As someone quite different from the person we really are. And get away with it much more successfully.

Because we can't be checked out visually. And of course even the visual aspects of online are deceptive. I was talking to someone a while ago about his wife's Facebook with her permission. He said to her. All your friends look really nice. She said. Oh they don't really look like that. They just choose the pictures that most like the people they'd like to look like. This presentation of a different self to the world is at its most extreme.

In second life. Second life is an online virtual world. In second life. In second life. In second life. You can be exactly who you want to present yourself as.

Physical characteristics. Name. Clothes. Interests. Abilities. All of those things you choose.

Glasgow University has a virtual campus on second life.

[14 : 21] Initiated to promote a sense of being at the University of Glasgow. For online distance education students. But of course it's not at all like being at the University.

Is it? Because you are entirely in control of the information you give to other people. People. The temptation to be who you'd like to be.

Is magnified online. Anyone who's tried to keep an honest diary in the real world. Will know how hard it is to present the truth about oneself.

Even to one's diary. But online. There is the freedom to do that. With little possibility that anyone will ever know. And that's something to be careful of.

Turn over very quickly to 2 Timothy 3.13. Page 1196. Page 1196. Now we're just touching down in this passage.

[15 : 23] It's a passage about people who teach untrue things in church. Lovers of self, Paul calls them. Not lovers of God. And we're touching down here just for a phrase.

This is not the usual. This is not the best way to read the Bible. But it's a very helpful phrase. So we're going there. It's a phrase that applies much more broadly than just to people who teach untruth.

Because it's a very human phrase. It's there in 3.13. Deceiving and being deceived. That's a regular combination in the Bible.

Deception and self-deception. And of course that's a regular combination in human experience. The image I portray then may not just be the deceptive version I want to portray to other people.

It may be the image I actually believe is true of me. Now of course none of this is restricted to the virtual world. But it's all exaggerated there.

[16 : 26] Because I can't be seen. So it's possible then, isn't it? That online I may have many things called friends. None of whom really know me.

And the reason they don't know me is not only that I don't want them to know me. But that I don't really know myself properly. One of the most precious things that Jesus has brought to humanity is a total revolution in relationship that cuts right through the deception and self-deception so

prevalent in human experience and especially on the online world.

Please turn to John chapter 15. Page 1083. A revolution in friendship.

Jesus is approaching his death. He's preparing his first disciples for his departure. Here are some of his words to them. Clearly now they're different from us in some ways, aren't they?

They saw him face to face. We have not yet seen him face to face. They will become his apostles, his authoritative messengers. We are not in the same way.

[17 : 48] But I take it that there are things here that they have in common with all those who listen to the words of Jesus. Let me say four things. First, Jesus is not deceived by human projection.

If there's one thing that's clear about Jesus in John's gospel, it is that he is not at all naive about human beings. He's not the sort of person whose eyes you could pull the wool over.

He is not the sort of person who, if he was your Facebook friend, would be taken in by the stuff that you put on your page. He is not the sort of person that you could trick into thinking well about you.

He's a person who sees right through all those he comes into contact with. So in chapter one, he meets Nathanael. And he says of Nathanael, at the first time he sets eyes on him, here is a true Israelite, one in whom there's nothing false.

And Nathanael says, how do you know me? And Jesus says to him, I saw you under the fig tree before your friend called you to come and see me.

[19 : 01] I knew you before I set eyes on you. In chapter four, he is an encounter with a Samaritan woman. And after their encounter, she says to her neighbors, come and see a man who told me everything I ever did.

Everything about her is known by him. She knows it. Jesus is not taken in by human beings, not then and not now. And yet this amazing person who sees us all completely invites us to be his friends.

Look at verse 14. You are my friends if you do what I command you. Many of us fear that our friends would not want to be close to us anymore if they really knew us.

Jesus, quite the opposite, knowing us, invites us to be his friends. He's not deceived. Second, Jesus is not a deceiver.

Verse 15. I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I've called you friends.

[20 : 24] For everything that I learned from my father, I have made known to you. When Jesus speaks, he is not interested in creating a good impression among those who are listening to him.

Rather, he insists here that he's got a task to fulfill, to pass on the words that he has received from his father to those he's to pass them on to. And that theme is absolutely everywhere in John's Gospel.

If you want some wonderful bedtime reading this evening, skim through John's Gospel and see the number of occasions on which Jesus says, He's given me a thing to do, and I love him, so I've done it.

He's given me a thing to do, and I love him, so I've done it. Chapter 5. The Father loves me and shows me all that he is doing. I do everything he shows me, and only the things that he shows me. My judgment is just because I don't seek to please myself, but him who sent me. The Father has given me works to do. I love the Father.

[21 : 32] I do the things he's given me works to do. The Father has given me words to speak because I love him. I speak the words he's given me to speak. Jesus did not come to project an image of himself.

He did not come because he felt he needed to be needed by people like us. He came to do what the Father gave him to do.

And this, friends, this is enormously encouraging. It means he can be trusted. We know how even the best of friendships can be marred by self-deception and deception.

But neither of those are part of what Jesus has come to do. He's not a flatterer. He's not a manipulator of human beings. Because his chief interest is not pleasing us, but pleasing his Father who sent him.

That is enormously reassuring. His words can be trusted. There's no hidden agenda. Verse 15, everything I learned from my Father I've made known to you.

[22 : 44] That was what I came to do. Jesus is not a deceiver. Third, Jesus takes loving initiative in friendship.

This passage is absolutely stuffed full of great reassurance about the loving initiative that Jesus has taken towards us human beings so that we might enter into relationship with him.

Look at the verbs. Verse 9, I have loved you. I did that. Verse 10, I have kept my Father's commands. Verse 11, I have loved you.

Sorry, verse 11, I've told you. Verse 12, I've loved you. Verse 14, I command. Verse 15, I have called you friends. Verse 15, I have made known the Father's things to you.

Verse 16, I chose you. Verse 17, I command. It could not be clearer, could it? Jesus is in the driving seat in the friendship realm.

[23 : 46] Jesus, the undeceived, non-deceiver, has taken loving initiative so that we might be his friends.

He is the center of it. He is the hub. It's not so that he could be our friend, notice. It's so that we could be his friends.

He's in the middle of the friendship revolution. And this is a revolution in friendship. One of the most amazing things about the Christian message.

That in an age like ours, so full of terrible uncertainty in relationship, insecurity, manipulateness, deception, self-deception.

We can be properly known and totally accepted by the one who's taken all the initiative in relating to us.

[24 : 51] Isn't that an amazing thing? He came into the world because he wants you. He wants you to trust him, to submit to him, to know him, to be forgiven by him, to be washed clean forever by him, to live your life for him now, to be with him in eternity, to be recreated by him as a being in the end.

He came into the world for that. But he took the initiative because that's what his father wanted him to do. How amazing that in a world so marked by relational uncertainty, we can be known as we are without having to pretend and accept it not because we're fundamentally good to know.

Or because, once again, we've done a really good job of pulling the wool over someone's eyes. Or because we've worked especially hard to please someone so that they like us.

But rather because of the overflowing kindness of one who wants to be known by us and wants us to know him. One whose knowing of us is not condemning, but cleansing, forgiving, recreating.

One who's not been tricked into accepting us, but instead has done everything through his death on the cross to make us clean. It's revolutionary.

[27 : 00] We're not reassured if we have more than ten. But Jesus turns relationship completely on its head. It's not, I'll be your friend.

It's, you are my friends if you do what I command you. He's at the middle. And again, that's wonderfully reassuring. For we do not have to go and persuade him to be our friend.

True friendship has him at the center. Depends on his loving initiative. And his faithfulness. And his power. And his commitment.

Can I just say, if you are not yet, if you have not yet taken the first steps in the relationship of love, the friendship that Jesus has invited humanity into, today would be a great day to thank him for all that he's done, to make real being known and accepted a reality.

Today would be a great day to start obeying his words and be counted among his friends. If you are someone who knows and has understood in some measure what it is like to be accepted by one who knows us through and through, some issues relating to friendship.

[28 : 27] If we are befriended by the Lord, how are we in the being a friend stakes? How are we doing it being a friend?

Not so much having friends. Here are three questions that you might help, that you might think about in relation to friendship in general and the online life in particular.

Number one, what is my online relating doing for me? It does things for us, doesn't it? We spend a lot of time online.

It must be because it does things for us. Why is it that I have to check Facebook all the time? Why do I tinker with my profile all the time?

Why do I love it so much when others get in touch with me? Does it make me feel loved? Does it make me feel secure? Does it make me feel special? Does it make me feel significant?

[29 : 31] Does it give a sense of being known and accepted? Is it a substitute for the kind of friendship that God holds out to me? Is it a substitute for relating to people face to face?

Second question. What am I using it for? You see, for the person who's known by God, the Bible is not so much focused on having friends, but being a friend.

What am I using it for? Am I projecting an image of myself? Or am I being a friend to others?

Am I using it for self-promotion? Or for the good of those on the receiving end? What am I using it for?

And third, what's my online profile like? Is it clear online that I'm a Christian?

[30 : 39] Is it clear online that I think Jesus is Lord? Is it clear online that I'm not concerned merely with the superficial?

Folks, it's great fun to have fun online, isn't it? It's great fun. You know, it's just great fun. And it's a great tool for relating to others. But is it clear that I'm interested in more than the merely superficial? Facebook, potentially a wonderful and powerful tool. But like all tools, it's not what they are that's the issue.

It's how you use them. Let's pray together. Just a moment to reflect for ourselves and respond to the Lord in the quiet, and then I'll lead us in prayer.

Let's pray together.

[32 : 03] I'll bring in the words of the Lord Jesus. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Remain in my love. To keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I've kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love.

My command is this. Love each other. As I've loved you, greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

And you are my friends if you do what I command. Gracious God, in a world so full of insecurity and of the projection of an image to others, of deception and self-deception, we thank you for your undeceived, undeceiving son.

We thank you for his magnificent initiative at your command for our good to bring us into friendship. We pray that we would be thoroughly grateful for this.

And we pray that our lives might not be wasted by the trivial. But rather, lived in relationship with our creator.

[33 : 39] Modeling, even if only partly, what it means to occupy the privileged position of your representatives in the world.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.