

***IRON SHARPENING IRON* FRIENDS**

Proverbs 27:17, Acts 18:1-3

Transition Video - Welcome to Celebration Church. Today is a special Sunday. It's Labor Day Sunday. It's also the end of our *Friendology* series. And before we get into it, I need to prepare you for next Sunday.

Next Sunday we're starting a new series called *Choices That Lead To Change.* But this is more than a series. Listen, none of us is enough like Jesus, and we all need some things to change in our lives. So for 7 weeks starting next Sunday, we're going to be learning about the *Choices That Lead To Change.* It's more than a series - it's going to be a season of spiritual growth for our church family. So I want you to do 3 things: 1) I want you to commit to reading our daily devotions that will be going out not just through email, but through a booklet we're giving our whole church. 2) I want everyone to join a life group. One reason we don't change is because we leave church at church. In a Life Group you can interact with lessons in a way that change will follow you home. 3) I want everyone to commit to coming to church for the next 7 weeks. And if you can't make it one week, make sure to watch online.

By the way, if you are a die-hard Saints fan, let me encourage you to start coming to the 9am service. That way you can be out of church and ready for the game. You know, I still think about the 2018 Saints season. The team went 13-3, all the way to the NFC Championship Game hosted downtown in the Superdome. And in that crowd were some people who skipped church because they were excited about the game. And now they're spending the rest of their lives wondering if the Saints lost that game because God was punishing them for skipping church. Listen, I don't think God made the Saints lose because people skipped church. I think the Saints lost because the officiating was awful. But why take the chance. So 9am for the foreseeable future is the service for Saints die-hards.

Today we are concluding our *Friendology* message series. In this series we've talked about making sure you're friends with Jesus. We've talked about *Ride Or Die friends, and we've talked about Through The Fire friends.* And we've learned some powerful lessons about friendship.

- **We've learned in our *Friendology* series that there are 1) "For a Season" Friends, 2) "Fairweather" Friends, 3) "Fake" Friends, 4) "False" Friends, and 5) "Faithful" Friends, but there are also 6) "Faith-Filled" Friends.**

We all need friends. *I once told someone I was looking for a stable friendship. They said I needed a horse. I know someone who was so lonely he had a pet rock. But even the rock took him for granite.* Everyone needs some "Faith-filled" friends in their lives.

- Paul - *"So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing."* (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

Paul valued friendship, especially brotherly and sisterly love among Christians.

- **Everyone - even the Apostle Paul - needs good friends in life.**

Paul actually had some amazing friends in his life, and we know about them from Scripture. I think about his friendship with Barnabas, who was one of the first to welcome him into Christian faith and advocated for him despite his past. I think about Silas who accompanied Paul on one of his missionary journeys and was even jailed with Paul. I think about Luke and Timothy. But there's a lesser known couple that don't have books of the Bible named after them, but they show up again and again and again in Paul's life and ministry. So I want to start today by reading two verses from Acts 18:1-2.

- *"Then Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he became acquainted with a Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently arrived from Italy with his wife, Priscilla."* (Acts 18:1-2)

This is a pivotal meeting that took place. Paul never forgot Priscilla and Aquila. But there are no books of the Bible named after them. Very few details of their lives are known. What is known is that…

- **Priscilla and Aquila cultivated special friendships centered around discipleship.**

This happened first with Paul and later with Apollos. While we don't know much about Priscilla and Aquila, there are some things we do know.

- **Priscilla and Aquila Facts:**
    - **Priscilla and Aquila are frequently mentioned in Paul's letters, with Priscilla typically preceding Aquila, signifying her ministry leadership role.**

It's a big deal that Priscilla is often mentioned first. What it tells us is that Priscilla was very involved in the ministry, and perhaps even viewed as a ministry leader.

It's also significant that Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned in Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Timothy. Those letters were written during different periods in Paul's ministry, to different cities. They show that Priscilla and Aquila were active in ministry leadership for a long time, and in a lot of places.

    - **Priscilla and Aquila met Paul in Corinth (Greece) after having been deported from Italy by Caesar.**

It's worth pointing out that both Priscilla and Aquila and Paul were coming out of tragic turns of events. Sometimes it's at the low points of life that God brings us faith-filled friends.

- **Piscilla and Aquila hosted churches in their homes.**

They were like Life Group Leaders of the 1st Century. Even in our day, in our very church, we have over 100 Priscillas and Aquilas who open their homes and lives to see others come to faith in Jesus and grow in their faith.

- **Priscilla and Aquila lived and worked with Paul in Corinth for 18 months, which was the second-longest stay of any of Paul's missionary stops.**

A lifelong friendship with Paul was built in a single 18-month season of ministry. God can do great things in a small time.

- **Priscilla and Aquila went on to disciple Apollos, who became a significant teacher in the early church.**

Priscilla and Aquila did not play the role of prototypical preachers or teachers. But their impact on the Kingdom of God was enormous. It was historical. And it continues today.
But at the core of Priscilla and Aquila's impact is friendship. They were friends with Paul. They were friends with Apollos. And the Lord used that friendship to build His Kingdom. It's a reminder that…

- **All of us need to have friends that push us closer to Jesus, and we need to be friends that bring others closer to Jesus.**

It's similar to what Proverbs says…

- *"As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend."* (Proverbs 27:17)

That's what we're talking about today. I want to tell you - you may be friends with Jesus. You may have Ride Or Die friends and Through The Fire friends. But,

- **We all need *"Iron Sharpening Iron"* friends in our lives.**

So today we want to explore,

- ***What does an "Iron Sharpening Iron" friend look like?***

"Iron Sharpening Iron" Friends Are WIlling To:

<u>SHARE</u> THEIR LIVES

- *"Then Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he became acquainted with a Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently arrived from Italy with his wife, Priscilla. They had left Italy when Claudius Caesar deported all Jews from Rome. Paul lived and worked with them, for they were tentmakers just as he was."* (Acts 18:1-3)

Earlier we read this same passage about how Paul met Priscilla and Aquila. But here we see how their relationship grew. Apparently, they shared a trade and they worked together. That's important. The people we work with are the people we spend the most time around. We joke with them in the hallways. We talk about the Saints on Monday mornings. But even though we share a lot of jokes, and space, and time, most of us don't really open up our lives. It's like we want to see the world through tinted glass. We want to see what's going on with others, but we don't really want them to see what's going on with us.

In my experience as a pastor, this is a huge point of tension for most people. Most people would rather hear a sermon on giving than hear a sermon on getting into a life group. I believe that's because…

- **Most of us would rather share our *stuff* than share our time, space, and experiences.**

The problem is that is the exact opposite of the way Paul did life and ministry. In his first letter to the church in Thessalonica, Paul wrote,

- Paul - *"We loved you so much that we shared with you not only God's Good News but our own lives, too."* (1 Thessalonians 2:8)

A big part of developing *iron-sharpening-iron* friendships is sharing your life so that people can see the REAL you. You know, I wish that Paul or Jesus had left us a handbook for how to grow spiritually from A to Z. But instead of giving us a handbook, they modeled long-term relational discipleship. Jesus spent 3 years sharing His life with His disciples. Paul spent 18 months with Priscilla and Aquila. The secret strategy for spiritual growth is sharing life.

There is a Four Seasons Hotel in Istanbul, Turkey. It's a luxury hotel that charges upward of $500 per night. What's really unusual about this hotel is that before it was a hotel, it was built to be a prison with guard towers and a courtyard for inmates' exercise. Now the exercise courtyard is a garden. It has marble bathrooms and giant plasma televisions. As a prison, it was built to keep the wrong people out and the right people in. It was a miserable place known for suffering. As a luxury hotel, it's a place of respite for any and all who can afford its price tag. It's teeming with life and activity and excitement. It's a palace open to anyone.

Here's the thing - we get to choose whether our lives look like a palace or a prison. But when we choose to guard our lives and keep people out,, we actually make our lives a prison. One of the simplest and most effective ways to remain spiritually stuck is to wall yourself off in a relational prison where no one gets in or out.

- **We cannot give or receive discipleship if we are unwilling to open our lives to others.**

Let me encourage you, if you're not doing this, but you're willing to try, get involved in a Life Group.

- **One of the best places to share our lives with others is in a Life Group, and one of the best times to do so is during our *Choices That Lead To Change* series.**

Hebrews says,

- *"Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near."* (Hebrews 11:24-25)

The truth is that the 1st century church meeting was much more like a Life Group than a modern worship service. Churches met in homes. Priscilla and Aquila actually hosted churches in their homes. When you share your life there's encouragement, there's acts of love and good works.

Now, in Paul's relationship with Priscilla and Aquila, we think it was Paul discipling Priscilla and Aquila. But we don't really know. That's because relational discipleship, iron-sharpening-iron relationships go two ways.

- **Effective discipleship travels both UP and DOWN.**

Over the years, I've sat under the discipleship of some great, godly people. And it's amazed me that they've seemed to benefit from the arrangement as well. And I've spent time discipling some younger, newer Christians. And I can tell you I'm not sure if they got more or if I got more out of it.

- ***What are some ways I can share my life with others?***

"Iron Sharpening Iron" Friends Are WIlling To:
<u>SACRIFICE</u> THEIR COMFORT

Have you ever been uncomfortable? I found out once someone felt I was invading their personal space, so I stormed out of their bathroom stall. The truth is, you can easily tell how uncomfortable a person is by simply hugging them for 18 minutes. I once had a pair of wooden shoes that were so uncomfortable I tried to flush them down the toilet. Worst clogs ever. Listen, developing "iron-sharpening-iron" friendships can sometimes be uncomfortable.

- Paul - *"Give my greetings to Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in the ministry of Christ Jesus. <u>In fact, they once risked their lives for me</u>. I am thankful to them, and so are all the Gentile churches. Also give my greetings to the church that meets in their home."* (Romans 16:3-5)

Now we don't know exactly what Priscilla and Aquila did to risk their lives for Paul. Paul often found himself in danger. He was an enemy of the religious establishment. Scripture says there were numerous times when he was jailed, stoned, or chased out of town by religious leaders. He was an enemy of the political establishment. History tells us there were numerous, violent persecutions during Paul's lifetime. What we know is that Paul wrote this letter 5-7 years after meeting Priscilla and Aquila. And somewhere in that time frame, Priscilla and Aquila risked it all for Paul.

Now praise the Lord - most of us aren't facing that kind of risk for our faith. But make no mistake - developing "iron-sharpening-iron" friendships brings risk and sacrifice. What I want you to realize today it,

- **If our friends won't take a risk or sacrifice for us, they are acquaintances.**

I love something that Helen Keller said. She said,

- "Security is mostly superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing." *-Helen Keller*

The primary reason many Christians don't develop "iron-sharpening-iron" relationships is they're intimidated. They're scared. It's uncomfortable. It comes with risk. It threatens the imaginary, superstitious security and comfort they've established.

So I don't want to sell you a false bill of goods. To build some "iron-sharpening-iron" friendships we're going to have to sacrifice our comfort. That's because…

- **When iron sharpens iron sparks are going to fly.**

So while we may not risk our lives in our faith, let me tell you what you can expect when we engage in discipleship.

- **Discipleship often brings about some *scary conversations.***
- Jesus - *"If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back."* (Matthew 18:15)

There have been times where, as a pastor, I've had to confront some people. I've had to confront church staff members that weren't tithing. I've had to confront Life Group leaders living in open sin. But Jesus' words weren't just for pastors - they were for all of us. And I want you to know even scarier than confronting someone as a pastor is confronting someone as a peer. *"Hey man, I think you need to watch your tone when you speak." "Hey man, I think this comment may have been inappropriate."* And I'm not always the confronter. Sometimes I'm the one being confronted. Someone can say, *"You know, I think you were wrong when you said this."* Neither side of that conversation is pleasant. But it's a conversation that has to happen. This is part of what it means to have an "iron-sharpening-iron" friendship. So if you're not having these conversations, neither you nor the people around you are getting sharper. You're getting duller.

- **Discipleship often brings about some *scary decisions.***
- Jesus - *"And if you do not carry your own cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple."* (Luke 14:27)

The great artist and sculptor Michaelangelo once said, *"Every block of stone has a statue inside of it, and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it."* I think the Lord would say that about our lives. Deep within our lives is this identity He created for us before we were born. And the work of discovering and walking in that identity involves chipping away at layers of stone that aren't supposed to be there. And let me tell you, chipping away at your life, your identity, and your habits until you find what God placed there - that's scary.

You've probably heard Pastor Dennis talk about the fact that I had blue hair when I came here. I did. I was proud of that blue hair. It was a part of my identity. But I became convicted about that blue hair. I don't think dying your hair is wrong. But I know that at that point of my life, blue hair was more about the identity I had created for myself. And I could never get to the identity God had created for me if I hadn't chipped away the blue hair. Beyond that, I don't think I could have endured the hardships of a life dedicated to serving the Lord if I hadn't been willing to let the Lord chip away at my outer false identity.

The bottom line is that….

- **Real disciples learn to get comfortable with being uncomfortable.**
- Jesus - *"I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."* (John 16:33)
- ***How can I become more comfortable being uncomfortable as a disciple?***

"Iron Sharpening Iron" Friends Are WIlling To:

<u>OFFER</u> THEIR FEEDBACK

- *"Meanwhile, a Jew named Apollos, an eloquent speaker who knew the Scriptures well, had arrived in Ephesus from Alexandria in Egypt. He had been taught the way of the Lord, and he taught others about Jesus with an enthusiastic spirit and with accuracy. However, he knew only about John's baptism. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him preaching boldly in the synagogue, they took him aside and explained the way of God even more accurately."* (Acts 18:24-26)

One day Boudreaux and Thibodeaux had gone to church and they got full of the Holy Spirit, and the Lord gave them the idea to go out to the highway and warn people. So they went out and held a sign up that said, "De End Is Near. Turn Yo Self Around Before Its Too Late." So a car came by, and the driver didn't appreciate their message. So he yelled some profanity and called them a bunch of religious nuts. Well a few seconds later they heard screeching tires and a big splash. So Boudreaux turned to Thibodeaux and said, "Maybe we should change the sign to say 'Bridge Out.'"

Sometimes, we're a little afraid to share our feedback because we don't want to be cussed at or called a religious nut. But sometimes the people in our lives need that kind of feedback.

- **In an age of hyper-tolerance, one of the bravest actions of a friend is to challenge their perspective.**

Paul said it this way…

- *"Dear brothers and sisters, if another believer is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself."* (Galatians 6:1)

When Priscilla and Aquila confronted Apollos, he was already a highly regarded teacher in the church. In fact, many people drew comparisons between him and Paul. So it took a lot of guts to give Apollos this feedback. But their feedback was important. It was valuable. It was offered with compassion and dignity. It changed the course of Apollos' life and ministry.

When we're willing to offer our feedback, from a heart of compassion and dignity, it can change someone else's life and ministry too. So let me give you some ways we can offer feedback.

- **A disciple should feel confident offering feedback by *sharing their testimony.***
- Jesus - *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be My witnesses, telling people about Me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* (Acts 1:8)

One of the greatest tools in our "iron-sharpening" toolbelt is personal testimony. It may be the story of how and why you came to Jesus. It may be a story of something else God has done in your life. But mark my words - if the Lord has done something/anything in your life - that story is for more than just you. It's to share. It's to offer encouragement and hope and a new perspective to someone else. Let me ask - has the Lord delivered you from harm? Raise your hand and

keep it up. Has the Lord provided for you? Raise that hand. Has He healed you or someone you know? Has He pulled you out of despair and put a new song in your heart? Everyone with their hand up - you have a testimony to share, and you need to share it.

- **A disciple should feel confident offering feedback by *sharing Scripture.***
- Jesus - *"The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"* (Matthew 4:4)

When I first became a Christian, I went to a young adult Bible study led by a man named Wayne. Wayne was a great Bible teacher. But what really impacted my life was he would write down these Bible verses on small strips of paper and hand them out. I can't tell you how many times the random Bible verse spoke to exactly what I was dealing with. If you follow Pastor Dennis on Facebook, I can guarantee you're gonna get two things. First, you're gonna get a birthday message. Second, you're gonna get a lot of Scripture. One of the simplest and most powerful ways you can "sharpen-iron" and give people feedback is to give them Scripture.

- **A disciple should feel confident offering feedback by *sharing a Word from the Holy Spirit.***
- Jesus - *"And when you are brought to trial in the synagogues and before rulers and authorities, don't worry about how to defend yourself or what to say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what needs to be said."* (Luke 12:11-12)

This one is a little tougher. Jesus was telling His disciples that at a moment of need, the Holy Spirit would tell them what to say. There have been so many times in my life, when I was on the brink of a big decision that God used a person to give me supernatural guidance and wisdom. And there have been moments where the Lord has used me to give a word to someone else. But before you go messing up people's lives telling them you speak for the Lord, be sure of 2 things. First, make sure you're prayed up and that the word you're giving is from the Holy Spirit, not Dr. Phil or Oprah. Second, you have to go into it with the right mix of boldness and humility. Sharing this word isn't about you. It's not even about the person you're sharing with. It's about the Lord.

And let me give you a tip for sharing feedback.

- **It's critical that whenever we share feedback, that we speak the truth in love.**
- Paul - *" Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church."* (Ephesians 4:15)

I've met and interacted with people who thought "speaking the truth" gave them the license to be callous, malicious, and rude. Let me say this clearly - speaking the truth never gives someone the right to be ugly. And loving compassion never gives someone the right to compromise the truth.

Developing "iron-sharpening-iron" friendships requires speaking the truth in love.

- **All Christians should treasure their Christian friends who offer feedback lovingly, and should aspire to do the same.**

If you have people in your life who speak the truth in love - whether it's their testimony, Scripture, or a Holy Spirit word of direction - you have a treasure. And we should all aim to be that kind of treasure to someone else.

- ***How can I speak the truth in love to the other Christians in my life?***

I want to go back to something we read earlier.

- Paul - *"I am thankful to [Priscilla and Aquila], and so are all the Gentile churches."* (Romans 16:4)

Can we just meditate on that for a moment? Priscilla and Aquila were not the superstar leaders that Paul and Apollos were. But somehow Paul viewed Priscilla and Aquila as benefactors to all the Gentile churches. It shows that…

- **God can do extraordinary things we never would have imagined when we build *"Iron-Sharpening-Iron"* friendships.**
- **If we are going to *build* and *be "Iron-Sharpening-Iron"* friends, we need to 1) Share Our Lives, 2) Sacrifice Our Comfort, and 3) Offer Our Feedback.**
- **At Celebration we invite you to find and become an *"Iron-Sharpening-Iron"* friend during our *Choices That Lead To Change* spiritual growth series.**
- **You can participate in our *Choices That Lead To Change* series by:**
    - **Committing to attend worship services each week of the series.**
    - **Participating in a Life Group for the duration of the series.**
    - **Reading and meditating on Daily Devotions.**
- ***What is the Lord saying to me through today's message?***

One thing that grieves me about the 21st century western church is the way we seek out heroes. Or we want to be heroes. We idolize preachers like John MacArthur or Steven Furtick. We get so obsessed with finding heroes and following heroes. But the story of the Gospel is that Jesus is the hero, and He has put His power into our hands.

I want to tell you a story about a man named Edward Kimball. Edward Kimball lived in Boston. In 1850, he was teaching Sunday school to youth boys at his church. Something that was really important to Edward was giving each student the opportunity to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. There was this one young man named Dwight who kind of got to him. He could see that the Lord was working on this young man. So he went to visit him at the shoe store where he worked. He found Dwight in the stock room. There Edward presented the Gospel to Dwight. Edward later said he thought he'd done a really poor job presenting the Gospel. But Dwight gave his life to Jesus that day and never looked back. He went on to become a famous evangelist known all around the world. Of course, the world knows him as DL Moody. There is a Bible college and a publishing company named after him. But that's not where the story of Edward Kimball stops. DL Moody inspired a pastor named Frederic Meyer to be an evangelist. Frederic Meyer inspired Wilbur Chapman to respond to God's calling on his life. Wilbur Chapman went on to mentor an evangelist named Billy Sunday. Billy Sunday inspired a group of men to host a revival, and they invited another evangelist named Mordecai Ham. There was a young man who responded to Mordecai Ham's message, and his name was Billy Graham. Many of you in this room may have friends or family members won to faith by Billy Graham

himself. The story of Edward Kimball keeps going and going and going as long as the Gospel keeps going and going and going.

Listen church, you can waste your time trying to idolize a hero or even be a hero. Or you can get to work discipling someone who might go on to win millions of people to faith in Christ. I don't know God's specific calling on each individual, but I know He has called all of us to be "iron-sharpening-iron" friends that leave an impact on those around us.