

Close Friends or Entangled Hearts?

Joys and Dangers in Woman-to-Woman Friendships



by Ellen Dykas

I was feeling slightly lonely, yet full of anticipation as I relocated to Philadelphia for a year of training and study in biblical counseling. Dreams, prayers, and hopes swirled in my heart as I began this new phase of my life. In the months before leaving St. Louis I prayed to meet kingdom companions with whom to share this new season of my life in the Lord.

Within days of the semester's kick-off, I began to make new friends. The woman-to-woman connections began: conversations at local coffee shops; weekly student women's fellowship; and sisterly times to share, care, and pray together. In our conversations we sought to apply heart-provoking course material in the campus café, during class breaks, and even in the whisper-filled campus library. We were female image-bearers making heart-to-heart connections.

But take note, God-imaging, heart-to-heart connections can have a dark counterfeit. What appears to be close friendship, may become idolatrous heart entanglement. How can a close relationship become idolatrous? What is a "godly friendship" for a woman?

People Idolatry

Women, for the most part, enjoy getting to

know each other. Women nurture others in relationships in obvious ways, though men, too, are capable of this nurturing (1 Thess. 2:6-8). Women are drawn to care, to initiate nurture, concern, and emotional intimacy with others. The subject of "people idolatry" among women has been more often applied to women's desires for love and security through men and children. It has not focused on how women get entangled in people worship with other women.

Lindsey and Kate moved to a new city at about the same time. Each was lonely and longed to build relationships with other women. Lindsey and her husband Joe, both new believers, had new jobs and both enjoyed their co-workers, but Lindsey desired to connect with other Christian women for encouragement and discipleship.

Kate, a single woman, relocated with her employer, a Christian organization that reaches out to young urban professionals. She served as area director for the women in her organization. She was responsible for mentoring and encouraging others and was extremely gifted in and passionate about this type of ministry. She, too, longed to build peer relationships and began to actively seek out new friends.

Kate and Lindsey met at church. Being newcomers, they struck up a conversation and felt immediate rapport with each other. They met for coffee the next week, began talking on the phone and e-mailing several times a week,

**Ellen Dykas is a student at CCEF. She has been involved in Bible teaching and ministry to women. She previously studied at Covenant Seminary.*

and planned time together whenever possible. Kate had a mentoring heart, and Lindsey's eager-to-learn heart were a perfect match for what became an entanglement between them. Although both women were friendly with other women in their relational spheres, their emotional focus and relational energy focused on each other and the good feelings they had in relating to each other. It seemed as if perceived needs of each of their hearts were being met.

Lindsay's husband, Joe, began to feel threatened and jealous by Lindsey's relationship with Kate. She always seemed eager to be with her mentor and spent a lot of time e-mailing her. She mentioned Kate's name to her husband at least once a day in recounting their deep conversations. She described Kate as the most nurturing person she'd ever met. Joe was confident of Lindsey's love for him but was growing in resentment toward this best friend to whom Lindsey confided her problems.

influence over their lives, Joe and Kate's co-staff gently tried to bring concerns to the table. When confronted individually, both women became defensive and angrily justified the perceived intensity of their friendship. They both refused the idea that they shouldn't spend so much time together or talking by e-mail or phone. They both felt good in this relationship. If they were both Christians, and it felt this good, how could it be wrong?

The dynamic of people worship active between Kate and Lindsey is evident in many relationships. Close friendships can become worship of another person for self-indulgent purposes. The friendship or mentoring relationship may seem God-oriented on the surface, but in reality, it is about what each person can get out of the relationship and how each one feels. Women involved in such relationships may be believers or non-believers, married or single, younger or older. Idolatry is

Close friendships can become worship of another person for self-indulgent purposes.

Some of Kate's ministry colleagues became concerned as well. Kate seemed to be investing an out-of-balance amount of time and emotional energy into her relationship with Lindsey. She frequently brought Lindsey up as the "ideal disciple" and mentioned more than once that she'd rarely had such an instant heart connection with a new friend. Yet Kate's emotional response to this relationship at times took on a different look. She surprised her co-staff a few times by bringing up, as a prayer request, her feelings of hurt and insecurity when Lindsey didn't respond to her with admiration and thankfulness.

Kate and Lindsey seemed to have a best friendship. They shared their hearts openly and deeply. They read the Bible and prayed with each other. They singled each other out as best friend and spoke of each other with increasing familiarity. If they had a free day or hour to spend with a friend, then it was always with each other. However, when the dynamics between them continued to exert such strong

not active in only one kind of person, but in all human hearts! (Lesbianism simply adds touch and sexual involvement to an already present idolatrous heart entanglement.)

Is Your Heart Entangled?

Hebrews 12:1-2 commands us to throw off everything that hinders us and entangles us in the walk of holiness. Sin is always a dark counterfeit for the glorious light of Christ. Prayerfully consider these questions before the Lord. Ask Him to examine your heart and expose any entangled friendships in your life, any people you exalt over Him in your life:

- Is there one friend who preoccupies your thoughts and feelings?
- Does "fear of man" rule in this relationship? (Do you have an anxious heart and thought consuming fear about what the person may give or withhold from you?)
- What drives you in this relationship:

Being needed? Being known? Being loved? Cared for? Feeling good?

- If you have someone you consider a best friend, does your circle of two invite others in? Do you encourage each other to serve and relate to others outside your two-some? Or are you threatened, jealous, insecure when someone else encroaches upon your friendship?
- Do you romanticize about conversations, hugs, time spent together and nice things done in the context of this friendship? (This is not to imply a sexual attraction but rather a pre-occupation of the senses.)
- How do you express physical affection with each other? Are your hugs prolonged? Is the way you touch each other something you feel uncomfortable with in public?
- Who do you find yourself talking *about* most of the time? Who do you find yourself talking *to* most of the time?

These questions may be uncomfortable to you. They are meant to be! The entanglement of an idolatrous friendship is sinful bondage and God wants to destroy it, cleanse you, and bring redemption to bear! What does God's Word have to say for our instruction, protection, and encouragement in the area of friendships with other women? What does a godly, heart-knit friendship look like? What is the redemptive answer for those tempted toward emotional entanglements in friendships? Let's consider several rich truths from the banquet table of God's Word.

Godly Friendship

In a godly friendship, Jesus and God's Word are central. The fruits of this holy centrality will be evident over time and in increasing ways through such things as worshiping, loving, and obeying God when you are together (Heb. 10:24). Such fruits would be:

- Over time each friend looks, talks, acts, behaves, thinks, and loves more and more like Jesus. This demonstrates a commitment to a lifestyle of loving God and loving others (Rom. 8:28-29; Eph. 5:1-2).

- Whole-hearted, whole-minded love for God flows out into love for the people in each friend's world (family, church, work, neighborhood) (Mark 12:29-31).
- Patience, kindness, loving pursuit, and forgiveness reign and rain in the midst of disappointment and failure by others to love well (Col. 3:12-14).
- Time spent together (coffee talks, shopping, bible study, walks, and so forth) brings enjoyment of each other in the presence of God. (Psalm 116 contains wonderful truths of how we are to live life before God and people).
- Love-motivated truth-speaking and humble confession of weakness and sin lead each to run to Jesus for His grace, love, and power to change (James 5:16; Eph. 4:15).
- Voices speak love to others and communicate encouragement, wisdom, honesty, and correction—not flattery, gossip, manipulation, or good-feeling about oneself (Eph. 4:29; Prov. 12:18; Ps. 19:14).
- Each challenges the other to live with heart and mind “set on things above” and to invest time, resources, affections, and relational energy into the kingdom of God, not on temporary pleasures (Col. 3:1-3).
- A lack of exclusivity invites others into your circle of two and propels you *out* of your circle of two. Many women have a fierce craving to possess others and yet Jesus enables us to *get out of ourselves* so that we aren't *consumed with our desires* (2 Cor. 5:14-15).
- Enjoyment of each other and celebrating life together with laughter, smiles, and ‘heart dances’ are gifts from God (James 1:17; Ps. 133).
- Many more aspects could be added to this list, but the preceding points present a foundational starting point.

Moving Toward and Growing in Holiness in Friendship

If you are involved in a friendship or mentoring relationship that is idolatrous, consider these steps:

1. Confess the sin of people-worship to God and to another trusted Christian friend. Confession is not just saying "I'm sorry God," but truly acknowledging that you have worshipped someone other than Jesus Christ.
2. Repent (turn away from) people-worship and seek accountability and godly counsel/discipleship for this area of your life. This is crucial! Our hearts are deceitful, and we so easily deceive ourselves (Jer. 17:9). It's easy to justify/explain away the sinful relationship with thoughts of "What's the big deal? We're just really, really close friends!" or "But I'm discipling this person. What is wrong with that?" Or "But she's the only close friend I have. I'll be lonely if I change the way I relate to her."

If selfishness is at the core of a relationship, it is neither a true discipling relationship nor a close friendship. The Bible speaks very directly and confrontationally to any form of

Jesus, abiding in Him alone. Any intrusion into your intimate wovenness with Jesus is not worth it! By and through God's grace, you need to take responsibility for your obedience before the Lord and if that means losing a relationship that is distracting you from Him, then let it go.

5. Grow in understanding a biblical view of relationships. The relationship section at any bookstore or on Internet is massive with information on such topics as codependency, attachment theory, self-esteem, intimacy, and others. The pathway towards holiness in our relationships can become confused and cloudy by worldly thinking that has a spiritual veneer. Instead, look to these five stepping stones that help in understanding God's view for friendship:

- Study the Bible and study Jesus! This seems so basic that we miss it! Look for

Confession is not just saying "I'm sorry God," but truly acknowledging that you have worshipped someone other than Jesus Christ.

idolatry in our lives by describing it this way: We prostitute our hearts before our holy God and desert Him. (Num. 15:37-41; Hosea 4:12; Ezek. 14:1-5; 1 John 5:21).

3. Honestly talk to the person with whom the entanglement has happened. A new God-given conviction must be expressed that you can no longer relate to this person as you have grown comfortable doing. You can only take responsibility for your own sin. It is not God's plan for you to fix the friendship or the other person. Be careful. This heart exposing conversation could be turned around to entangle you more!
4. Trust God for His ultimate redemption but be willing to lose this relationship. God does want to bring holiness and rightness into this dark world, and that includes any relationship in your life that may have the entanglement of sin. However, this is not a promise that an idolatrous relationship will be transformed this side of heaven. This is extremely painful, but our goal is to be set on

what God says about how we are to relate to other people. God's Word reveals practical wisdom to us and the path toward wise love will always lead us to consider Jesus, our model for true friendship. All that Jesus is, does, and has done teaches us how and *enables* us to live out a lifestyle and ministry of friendship. He initiates, pursues, forgives, is ever present (and thus never not with me), listens, talks, reveals, celebrates, teaches, comforts, counsels, and knows us. His presence in me by the Spirit enables me to grow in being a friend to others as He is to me!

- Use biblical vocabulary. Begin to define and interpret your relationships in biblical categories, rather than the way our culture (even church culture!) does. The Bible speaks of idolatry, not *codependency*; of fear of man, not *attachment* issues; of loving others

selflessly, not *having my felt needs* met. It focuses much more on the beauty and glory of the family of God relationships, and *not just getting friends*.²

- View other women as daughters of God and sisters in Christ, rather than just friends. As I look upon my classmates, church mates, and other women as sisters in the Lord, it helps me to reorient the desires of my heart from getting friends for myself to being a sister in Jesus to them. I steer away from seeking or naming a best friend because of the temptation toward favoritism and idolatry.
- Daily examine your heart to see if you are sowing to the Spirit or sowing to the sinful nature in your relationships. What we *need* is not to be loved, known, appreciated, and cared for by others. Though we desire to be loved, known, appreciated, and cared for by others, what we *truly need* is Jesus: to worship Him, to love others for His glory, to be humbly aware that we don't have one drop of sincere love in ourselves, to repent of our selfishness. We need to live in light of the words of the hymn, "O Jesus, I Need Thee Every Hour," if we are to love others as God calls us to!
- Consider: How does Jesus treat you? His friendship is the model for an honest and caring intimacy that crosses all lines of dissension. You best learn how to become a friend by being befriended by Him.

An Anchor and Guide to Loving Rightly

"Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers (and sisters), love one another deeply from the heart" (1 Pet. 1:22). This one powerful sentence disciples us in how to love others. But when you try to obey this verse out of order, entanglements can happen.

Earlier in 1 Peter 1, Peter exhorted us to Praise God and reminded us of our inheritance in Christ. He told us to have Christ-readied minds, to be self-controlled, to set our hope fully on the grace to come in Christ, to be holy in all we do, and to live our earthly lives (which

includes all our relationships too) in reverent fear before God. Verse 22 explodes with meaning as Peter assumes obedience to that list of instruction!

A deep-hearted, fervent love for others will only flow from hearts that have been purified by obedience to the truth! This obedience and cleansing of our hearts leads to sincere love of others. From the foundation of sincere love, coming from Jesus-filled and Jesus worshipping hearts, we are then to move into deep hearted love. This involves our affections and warmth of heart, but those affectionate desires, if not founded upon obedience to God, will become evil, corrupt, and self oriented. Entanglements happen in life when you move toward people and love them from the deep feelings of the heart, rather than as a response of worship and obedience to Christ. Follow the proper order of 1 Peter 1:22 and be amazed at the radical difference in relationships when Christ is the focus.

God is glorified when His creation lives and breathes and has its being in Him, radiating His glory, His purposes, His love into this world. May our friendships as women be one more place where the light of His love burns and shines with holiness!

¹ David Powlison, "I Am Motivated When I Feel Desire," in *Seeing with New Eyes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003).

² Ed Welch, *When People are Big and God is Small* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997).