

Strong Friends for Strong Enemies

By Bobby Schuller

Life can be hard at times. The hardest thing in life are the weird curveballs that it will throw at you; things you never thought would happen. Very often it's a challenge, it's a mountain, it's a sick kid, it's a terrible breakup or divorce that you didn't think would happen, it's a business, and sometimes it's an enemy. Sometimes it's a next-door neighbor. Sometimes it's a lawsuit. Sometimes it's kind of like a political rival at your school or business. Or maybe it's a competitor, or maybe it's a social competitor who lies about you, and now you feel like you have to defend yourself against this betrayal.

And all through life, we have these things that happen to us, and usually the feeling that we have is either something like I wish this wasn't happening to me, or this is so unfair. And we ask questions like what did I ever do to deserve this? And though I can't always explain why these hard things come in life, I can make you a promise that one: God loves you so much. I just want you to understand God is so for you and not against you. He is so on your side. And when you face tough enemies, when you face strong enemies, I want to make you a promise – God's going to give you a strong friend. God's going to put someone in

your life to help you get through that tough time. That person, you may not have known them before this trial, but very often in life, I have seen that God in His goodness, and I don't just mean His Holy Spirit, and it is that, He's going to put someone in your life to help you get through this thing together. I think the only thing that's worse than suffering is suffering alone. God knows that, and He's going to put someone in your life to carry you through.

The Bible says in its sort of opening preamble in the Creation story. We have to remember that Jewish kids back in the first century in Jesus' day, had to memorize the first five books of the Bible. That would have been tough, especially when you get to like Leviticus. That'd be a tough one. But they say, have you ever memorized something like in school and you have to say the line over and over and over and over. There's something when you memorize something that things really pop out at you. And so the first things kids would memorize is Genesis one, two and so on and so forth.

And it opens like this: In the beginning, God created light, and He said it was good. And then God creates land and the sea, and He says it is good. And then He creates seed bearing plants and He says what? It is good. And then He creates the moon and the stars, and then what does He say? It is good, very nice. You can participate. Last one, here we go. God creates the birds and the creatures, and He says what? (AUDIENCE – it is good) It is good, that's right! Over and over, it is good, it is good, it

is good, it is good. And then God creates man, and He says it is not good that man should be alone. It is not good that man should be alone. He looked at that bachelor pad and He said no more.

It's really not just a thing about, by gender, men, it's about people. It's not good that any of us are alone. Human beings are the only type of creature that I can think of where solitary confinement is almost considered torture. We are social beings and so much of the pain and suffering we experience in life, so many of the sleepless nights that we feel have to do with our loneliness or our relationships or feeling like one of those things will be threatened.

Can I tell you something? God loves you so much and He has not called you to be alone. Yes, some of you won't be married, and that's fine. You don't have to be married. But that doesn't mean you need to be alone. God has good friends, colleagues, and brothers and sisters in the Lord who will feel like family, even though they're not kin, and these are some of the most important people. God has these people in mind for you because He loves you.

If this last year and a half taught all of us something, like a lot of us are disagreeing on clinical/medical policies. In the last year and a half, there are things that many of us disagree on politically, clinically, all sorts of things, but one thing we can all agree on is this – that one of the greatest bits of suffering that we experienced was the loneliness. That very often the only ways we could manage to connect at the worst parts

of this last year and a half, say connecting with family through Zoom, to me often felt like scratching a mosquito bite. You know what I mean by that? Helped a little bit but then after that Zoom call is over, somehow you feel even more lonely than you did before. You might have said to yourself gosh, I miss my grandkids, I miss my best friend, I miss my church. It was so strange for us to come in here and to have only a handful of people in here, all spread out and just thinking about how much energy and life, and how electric it could be here on Sunday morning. And as we were speaking to cameras and trying to encourage people, we'd leave, and it just felt so lonely.

And what we've seen is how that loneliness physically can harm people. How over time it is not good that man should be alone. And I believe that we've recognized that about ourselves; I hope we have, and have understood the value of deep friendships, of deep connection with the people that we love.

I also think that this whole thing we went through caused anxiety to go through the roof; people that were already anxious became doubly anxious. People that never were anxious are now anxious. And now that it's kind of going back to normal as it were, there's still, at least I feel it, a level of anxiousness. I'm not going to say anxiety, but just anxiousness about; we hold people at a distance. And I don't mean just literally, and we do, we social distance, but there's a way in which we have a proclivity to judge a stranger. Instead of labeling our neighbor as the beloved of

God, as someone God's called me to care for, and give hope and inspiration to, we say I wonder what they think politically. I wonder what they think about this or that. I wonder where they're from.

And so there's already this weird thing that's now been baked into the pie where many of us are struggling not to ask those questions, like there's this undergirding thing of feeling a little bit threatened by neighbor, and God wants to free you of that today. Get rid of that. The only thing we need to judge our neighbor by is.. I mean there is no judgement we need to make; we just need to recognize and label our neighbor as the beloved sons and daughters of God. And that's who you are. I don't care about your politics. I don't care about any of that stuff. You know what I care about? I care about you. I love you, and so does the Lord, and I want you to know you're going to get through what you're going through. And that's the way we should see people.

We are scared to death of people we should be loving. If we weren't scared of people, then we would have civil conversations about politics and medicine, but we just can't anymore because we're all so anxious. You see? This is how perfect fear casts out Christian love. And it's not for you and it's not for me. We don't have to live in fear. We don't have to be anxious. We can just love everybody. Isn't that great? We can just love everybody. We can let God be the judge, vote according to your convictions, do what's right, but love everybody.

Not long ago, you know, I get up super early in the morning, and I was at a Starbucks not far from our house at five in the morning. And its winter now, so at five in the morning, its dark outside and there's an environment of quietness and stillness, which I appreciate about the morning. And of course, I had the biggest cup of coffee I could order. It's called a Trenta. I bet you didn't know there was a Trenta, did you.

I was sitting in the corner drinking my coffee, kind of like Strider in Lord of the Rings. I don't think anybody really knew I was there. And there were three young women who were manning the fort. They were serving the coffee and there weren't really many customers coming through, so they were just separating things and labeling things and prepping the food and the coffee and such, and I was over in the corner with my book.

And then a man came in. He was a big man. And he was a loud man. And as he came in, he said something like.. I don't remember what he said, something like 'good morning, it's a good day for coffee!' Or something like this, and instantly my Spidey senses went up, you know what I mean? And I went (VOOM) like (VOOM) like this. And it was one of those things where I was like instantly I do not like this guy. This was a few days ago, okay, so as much as I talk about loving people, it's a struggle. It was like (VOOF) I don't like this person. And instead of looking down at my book, the book came up to me like this (VOOOOO) where you're like doing this thing. Because it's just three young women

and this big dude. And he's really loud. And he's like kind of positive but in a creepy way. It's weird. I get accused of that sometimes. Anyway.

So he's talking and I'm like kind of a little bit concerned and dislike this person because he seems like he could be a threat. And then one of the girls comes over and starts talking to him, and she's being nice to him and he's kind of still being loud, I could hear everything he's saying. He's using the word bro a lot and he's saying all this stuff. And I'm like watching him. Basically, he's a guy that they know. He comes and he picks up things. He picked up a box full of stuff before he leaves, but I could tell he was talking to this girl for a long time, and then she went into the back and kind of disappeared, and then someone else came and talked to him briefly, but when he started talking to the second person, he was doing it in a normal voice. He wasn't loud anymore.

But then after the first girl, after she left, he had this like sad look on his face, kind of looked down. And then I realized he wasn't a dangerous person, he probably works there with them all the time, they know who he is, he liked her! He likes this girl! And he was like probably amping himself up to have a conversation about her, or talk to her, impress her, and you know trying to be confident, and maybe get her number. And she wasn't really into him. You could tell. They were about the same age. She went to the back and didn't really come back out and he could tell, and you could see him kind of slump his shoulders a little bit and feel bad about that.

And I instantly realized what I was doing. What I thought I was seeing was a threat. Maybe a guy who was a danger to these women, and I was picturing myself in this weird soldierly stupid way. But what was actually happening was a young guy who knew this girl and was nervous, and wanted to talk to her, and a guy who because of that maybe messed up a little bit. And so he sort of left in a sad way with the things he came to pick up, and I'm just going to say a prayer and hope that he does a little better next time.

But do you see how when we feel threatened by someone, or when somebody spooks the horses, as it were, it's very hard to see what's really happening. Very hard to see a person, we see a threat. Very hard to see who the person is. We see a vote, or we see an ideological perspective that's different than ours, and so there's all this judgement and fear that's in our body, we don't even recognize it. We experience it as anger or protection or safety, and sometimes you have to do that, there are dangerous people, but overall, overall, no. We want to be at peace with our neighbor and love those people the way God loves us. Amen? And boy, does God love you. He loves you. He is for you and not against you. Even on your worst day God is for you. Even in your worst sin, God loves you. God believes in you, is for you, is on your side. You're His kid! And He is a source of unconditional love and life that we can tap into if we only have the faith whenever we want.

Now the greatest commandment, you remember? Love the Lord with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength, and second to this, everybody say second to this (AUDIENCE – second to this) love your neighbor as yourself. Now, if we just do this, we've got it. We've got the whole thing. It's easy to understand, but it's hard to do. It's hard to love the Lord sometimes, and it's hard to feel loved by God sometimes. It's hard to believe in God sometimes. It's hard to see your neighbor as a real person sometimes. But when we can lean into these things, God offers us the kind of quality of life that we look for in so many other things, its right there. Its right there.

So, this is the method of the believer, the disciple of Jesus, who wants to live the quality of eternal life, is to abide in God's love and just pay it forward to the neighbor. It's so simple. Just abide in God's love and pay it forward to our neighbor.

All of us have a longing, a longing for unconditional love. We long for it, for people to just see us as we are, with all of our flaws and weirdness and just be for us and to love us. But you can't get that love from your spouse. You can't get that love from your neighbor. You can't get that love at a church. You can't get it from anybody. There's only one person who can give you that kind of love. It's the Lord. But, when we receive that need from God, we then don't bring this emptiness to our relationships, to our friendships, to our job, to our churches, we bring a full tank! We bring life, we bring what God's already doing inside of us.

And then our relationships are just blessed by it. We don't get all angry when this person can't love us unconditionally. We come with a full tank. This is what the Bible teaches us to do.

Look at this in 1st John, "dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God." Wow, isn't that powerful? "Whoever does not love, does not know God because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us. He sent his one and only son into the world that we might live through him. This is love. Not that we loved God but that he loved us, and he sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one's ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is made complete in us."

Can I say something to you? All of us, every single person in this room has done something wicked in their life. Every single person in here has done something to harm an innocent person. Whether we know it or not, many of us have trained ourselves to forget it. I promise you, everyone in here, except for maybe some of the children, every adult in this room has done something really bad. The world will often teach us, and this is why it can't answer this core problem, will say brush it off, what's done is done, and move on. That is so close, so close, but the problem is I know for the things I've done, I can't just go oops. My bad.

Its far better to acknowledge and say to yourself what I did was bad, but the price was paid. What I did was bad, but the price was paid. I have been saved by a work of love and life. You can't lie to yourself. You can't deny this thing. You can push it into an unconscious place. Far better for you to say, Lord, its who I am, I made a mistake, forgive me. And you know what the Lord says? You're forgiven!

There is no reason for those who live under the easy yoke of God's love that we should feel any shame ever again. God never wants you to feel shame. He did not just free us from our sin, he freed us from our shame. Do we believe it? Do we believe these songs we sing? Do we believe these scriptures we recite? See I think that one of the greatest things that separates us from loving our neighbor is this feeling of shame, it causes us to pretend and to live fakely. God never puts.. fakely.. that's a new word. God never puts shame on you. There's only one spiritual creature that does that, and his name is Satan.

See, the Bible calls Satan the accuser of the brethren, and it calls Jesus Christ the advocate. It's like you're standing in a courtroom, and Jesus is your attorney. And the prosecuting attorney is going 'your honor, she is a wicked, horrible person. She's addicted to pain pills. Did you hear what she said about her sister, and she did this in her past? Oh and by the way, nobody knows about that thing she did when she was 16.' And then Jesus, your attorney is like 'no your honor, he's wrong. She's forgiven, the price has been paid, it's a clean slate, it's an open and

shut case.’ And then the judge is about to say, ‘you know what, you’re right.’ and then right that, you’re like ‘nope, nope, Jesus is wrong. Satan’s right.’ See that’s what you’re doing spiritually. This is a metaphor really that the Bible uses about the courtroom. Can you imagine how upset your attorney would be in real life if you were in a lawsuit and in the middle of a case, just disagreed with your attorney and said that that prosecution was right?

All that to simply say don’t brush it off and pretend like it didn’t happen. Cover it in the blood and the love of God. It is paid. It is done. Don’t allow yourself to wallow in shame anymore. You are loved right where you are. And you say well I still have these struggles, I still have these sins, I still have these mistakes in my life. Friend, it is ridding yourself of the shame and the fear and the anxiety that frees you from those vices, maybe, that you want to get rid of from your life. When you know that you’re loved by God, you can reach out to your neighbor for help. You don’t have to pretend anymore. When you’re loved by God, you can confess the mistakes that you made, maybe to your spouse or to your best friend or to your colleague. When you’re loved by God, it gives you the freedom to let go of trying to control the outcomes of your past mistakes, and you allow the Holy Spirit to come in and just bless you.

So I want you to know that we live from this idea that an act of love saved me. That the greatest living creature, the most joyful and holy creature in the universe saved me by giving His own life for me because

He loves me that much. And that I should be honored by that and not feel shame, and be grateful.

And so this is at the core of our faith, is that because an act of love saved me, I can love other people even when they're not perfect. I can love other people, even though they might be annoying, or I might be afraid of them, or feel threatened, I could just be free and love my neighbor. So when we do this, we stop bringing our God need to our spouse and expecting that our spouse loves us unconditionally. Your spouse can't love you unconditionally. You can't love your spouse unconditionally. Only God can do that. But when we allow God to love us unconditionally, we can bring our best and forget the rest. We don't need our kids to love us unconditionally, we don't need our boss to lead us perfectly, we don't need our organizations to be perfect, we can just expect what we can expect. Just hope for the best, but trust that in the middle of it all, God has always something better in store, and He does! Because He is so, so for you. So just love your neighbor.

I say all the time that God loves you, and sometimes I'll just say it, and I feel this way, that I love you, and I do! I love you. And I remember meeting a man once, and he said how does your church say you turn to a stranger, and you shake his hand, and you say God loves you and so do I. And he says to me, how can I say that to my neighbor. I've never even met the guy. And I said love's not a feeling, right? Love means care for human good. There are some feelings in love, so maybe that's not the

best way to say it, but you can love a stranger if you care about that person. You see? And so although the love that God has for you is greater than the care you would have for a stranger, you can love everybody. Not by necessarily having all the warm and fuzzies, but you can care about that person. You can care. Okay.

So I just want to finish with this promise. God, because He loves you, will not force you to fight your battle alone. God will not force you to fight your battle alone. When you feel a strong enemy or a strong challenge coming into your life, God is going to send a stronger friend into your life to help you through it. When you're facing a challenge, or a tough or difficult thing, I want you to trust and pray for and believe and open your eyes and believe that God's going to send someone else into your life to carry you through that difficult time.

Remember when David was facing one of his worst challenges, King Saul, who was a great enemy to David. Along with Saul, also came Jonathan! Jonathan was Saul's son, and Jonathan ends up being David's best friend. Very often in life, when the greatest challenge comes to you, your greatest friend is going to come, too. And so very often that person is going to come out of the blue, but sometimes, and this is my last thought, I want you to understand, too, that there are sometimes people in your life who are sort of dormant, that become activated when the challenge arrives.

In other words, the person God might be sending into your life may be somebody you already know. Somebody you never thought of. Maybe it's a quiet person. But very often that friend that's going to walk with you through the valley, is going to be someone you already know. Sometimes it's someone like a spouse, or someone like that, that it's weird how when you're in a relationship, a challenge can cause you to be closer to each other. That might be coming for you. But no matter what, I want you to know that God is for you, not against you.

Can I leave you with this thought? The greatest thing that separates us from connecting deeply with the people that we love is this internal feeling that I'm an embarrassing person. Or that I'm not good enough in some way. Maybe it has something to do with the way you look or has something to do with the amount of money you make, or you feel like you're not successful enough in your work. There's just some weird shame. You're like, I don't know if people like me in general. But in life, we can let go of that by receiving from the Lord.

There's this great quote from St. Augustine, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Him." There are going to be people that reject you. There are going to be times when you're embarrassed unfairly. But you don't have to carry that as a burden. When you rest in God, you can just brush it off your shoulders and say, all right, they don't like me. Their loss. Their loss. There are people that God has sent into my life that I can connect with deeply and it's not good that I should be alone.

So I'm going to trust that with all my flaws and mistakes, that God's for me and not against me, that God loves me, He's forgiven me, and I'm not going to bring my God need to my friends. I'm just going to love people right where they're at and make that investment and pour into people and bless people, and that will bring me some of the greatest life I can experience. You may have a great enemy coming into your life, but I promise you there's a greater friend at hand.

So Father, we ask for this in Jesus' name that you'd give us eyes to see and ears to hear. And Lord, I think that some people are now who are in a marriage that's okay, not divorced, but I pray, God, that you'd bring friendliness and fun back into some marriages. For those who have lost a friend who's moved out of town, or we feel a sense of sadness over a friend or a loved one who's died or passed away suddenly, I pray God that you'd bring new friends into their life that they would be blessed with kindness and love, that would be not unconditional, but the kind of love we need to get through life and to enjoy life.

Father, we thank you so much that we are loveable, that there are things about us that we offer to our neighbor, that we don't have to wallow in shame and fear. We can trust that people enjoy us, and that you love us, and we thank you, God, it's in the very strong name of Jesus we pray, amen.