# Friendship

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## Becoming a Friend

Friendship is a special heartfelt attachment between two or more people. It is a trusting relationship between people, based on selflessness. It is a personal emotional and spiritual bond. It is mutual affection, respect, and love within a relationship.

Friendship may include common interests, but it may also exist without them. In that case, the other person's choices and preferences are taken into consideration.

Friendship is a very familiar concept describing personal relationships between people.

Many stereotypes imposed by society have created a certain image of friendship in people's minds. They dictate its rules and shape their own trends and laws.

There are as many opinions about friendship as there are people, because everyone has personal experience with such relationships. Based on that experience, each person forms his own understanding of who is a friend, who cannot be one, who fits that definition, and who has no chance of ever fitting it.

Friendship, like love, can be either one-sided or mutual.

In any case, no matter how friendship is defined, it is universally regarded as something positive and necessary in human relationships.

However, the nature of my personal friendship depends on the extent to which I understand and envision such relationships in my own life. If I am firmly convinced that friendship must exist within certain boundaries, I will not be able to cross those boundaries. I can broaden my understanding of friendship only by studying the subject and accepting truths that are new to me and that convince me they can become a reality in my life.

If I define friendship as a conditional relationship limited to certain actions, I will regard any step beyond those boundaries as arrogance or betrayal and will eventually break off the relationship.

Conditions in friendship are probably the most destructive mechanism, ready to destroy everything once they are set in motion.

I know many such examples from my own life and from the stories of those close to me. I see how often this happens. As a result, a person is left alone with memories of how many friends he once had. But were they truly his friends?

Loneliness comes, and with it comes sorrow. Memories of my former life among friends brighten my dull everyday existence. I look through old photographs and grieve over the past. What changed? Why did I lose everyone? I changed, and I can do nothing about the fact that my situation has become so discouraging. Yet I cannot allow myself to destroy my understanding of friendship, because then I would cease to be myself.

And when your close friend dies, a part of you dies with him. I understand that a tragedy has taken place in my life, something I cannot change. The pain in my soul pierces my heart, and I must go on living with it.

But life continues, and something must be done, something must be built, and something must be learned.

I have often attended funerals, and I am always amazed by how many people come to see someone close to them on his final journey, to say kind words beside a closed casket, and to remember all the good things that connected them with that person. Every time, I wonder why so few people said those kind words to him, visited him, or spent time with him while he was alive. Then he could have appreciated it all, and those words would not have been spoken in vain. But while a person is alive, there is no time to spend on those who do not mean very much to you.

Every one of us must live with such a burden of knowledge and ideas without understanding how to break free from these bonds. We have mastered many fields of knowledge, learned how to earn and spend money, become able to distinguish evil from good, and discovered many things for ourselves. Yet in the

end, we are left alone with our knowledge. And if there are exceptions, they are based on certain circumstances and rules that I am still willing to follow.

The world lies in sin, and sin has destroyed every good thing that God has given us. In order to survive somehow and preserve a reasonably joyful life for myself, I begin inventing things for myself or looking for communities built around shared interests.

When I first read the book of Ecclesiastes, I was amazed by the wisdom and insight of its author. Then I concluded that this man must have been suffering from severe depression. Only later did I understand that Solomon was instructing those who might wish to experience what he himself had already experienced. The wise man summed up his life and called it vanity, or emptiness of emptiness. Such was the conclusion of the wealthiest man. It is worth listening to him.

Understanding all these lessons and problems, I decided to look for something better—the very opposite of all this. I wanted to find it now, while I was still alive and able to think and analyze.

I began asking God to give me an understanding of true love, happiness, and friendship. I was not satisfied with the conditions imposed by my own mind; I wanted stability in these matters. I desired to discover what I did not understand, because I had no true picture of what our relationships should be like. I began earnestly pleading with God to reveal this mystery of love and friendship to me, and He began answering and teaching me.

As it turns out, friendship is an entire field of knowledge, governed by its own laws and relationships. It is very closely connected with love and truth. It is impossible to speak about friendship apart from love or from Christ and present it as something independent and complete. That would be like cutting off a head and claiming that the head itself is the entire person—a center of influence that does not depend on the rest of the body.

Jesus is the Author and Architect of every right relationship. If Christ is absent from a relationship, it will be wrong from the very beginning, because wherever Jesus is absent, sin dwells, and sin either destroys or offers a counterfeit.

If I say that true friendship does not exist and that it must be conditional, I misrepresent God by confining Him within subjective limitations. And if I consider something impossible, I will never desire to do it or even attempt it.

For example, I believe that it is physically impossible for me to overturn a loaded truck, so I will not even try. The same thing can happen in my understanding of friendship. For instance, when I hear that friendship between a man and a woman is impossible and I believe it, I will not even try to take any steps in that direction. Why should I? After all, it is impossible. Yet when I study the Bible, I do not find such an understanding there. This means that someone has succeeded in convincing me of something that has no biblical foundation.

I know of many situations in which this is exactly what happened—friendship ended with the breaking of the seventh commandment. But this does not mean that friendship is impossible. It means only one thing: the concepts and understanding of friendship have either been distorted or are completely absent. In such a case, the flesh writes its own rules, and I begin living by them. Then it truly becomes impossible to fulfill God’s will while living by the laws of sin.

The enemy of souls has a rule: he distorts everything God has said and presents it in a false light. He distorted the concept of love by turning it into sexual immorality. He replaced friendship with something conditional and sentimental. He perverted the meaning of happiness by replacing it with consumerism. But God possesses Love, Happiness, and Friendship, and He desires to teach me these things. After teaching me, He desires to teach me how to share them with others.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Proverbs 17:17; 18:24; Colossians 3:15; 1 Peter 3:8; 2 Timothy 3:2.

## Friendliness

There was a time in my life when I would read Proverbs 18:24: “A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother,” and try to understand what it meant to be friendly.

I knew how to be cheerful and funny, how to entertain people, and how to achieve certain personal goals. I could even quickly get to know people and gain their trust, only to lose it all later because of my ambitious nature or religious intolerance. As a result, many of my friends kept their distance from me and tactfully avoided communicating with me.

I read many books about friendship and saw it portrayed in movies. I always dreamed of having many true friends who would remain with me throughout my life.

But something was always wrong. I was too young for some people and too old for others. Some had no time for me, while others simply found me uninteresting. I saw all this and therefore did not want to force myself upon those who did not need me.

The people of western Germany have a particular way of life. They build their lives and their social circles within their families, and they do not let anyone else enter those circles. Everyone lives independently in his own little world, neither interfering with others nor taking an interest in them. The influence of this attitude can even be seen in the church.

At one point in my Christian life, I became acquainted with people who, in my view, were doing something for God, and I wanted to become friends with them. I began supporting them, communicating with them, and taking part in their missionary work. We spent time talking about how much sin surrounded us and how displeasing it was to God. Within the boundaries of our ministry, our group was quite close-knit. Yet somewhere deep inside, I understood that this friendship was conditional: as long as you are with us, you are our friend. Then, at one point, I decided to stop financially supporting this movement. This

caused a rift in our relationships, and eventually they ended altogether.

I realized that I had simply been left alone in this vast Christian world. Those who knew me considered me divisive and were afraid to befriend me. And I did not know where to look for new friends.

But I had read that God has a faithful remnant—people who live in obedience and love one another. This was very interesting to me. I understood that friendship should exist, but I did not see it around me. What good did it do me that some people were friends with each other if they had no interest in me? All of this was foreign to me. By that time, I had already been in the church for fourteen years and had reached a state of complete loneliness. I did not know where to go from there. I understood the truth and the teachings, but I did not see in my own life the beauty of relationships about which so much had been written.

During this crisis in my relationships in 2009, I began asking God for love. He answered my request and began teaching me this field of knowledge. It was as though I had been born again. It was fascinating to compare what I knew with these new feelings and to see their complete harmony and beauty. I discovered a new Friend—Jesus. I began spending much time communicating with Him, and He began teaching and changing me. I longed so deeply to have many friends with whom I could share my new discoveries, but I did not know where to find them.

Then, through some people, the Lord gave me a disc containing lectures by medical missionaries on the subject “The More Excellent Way.” I listened and could hardly believe my ears. I had read so much about God having people who live in the light of His reforms and love one another, and I longed to see such a people. And now it turned out that such people really existed. But they were far away in Ukraine, and I decided to go there. I learned that they would hold a camp meeting in 2010, registered, and began preparing. I now had a goal: to reach the “Our Home” health center and see true Christians with my own eyes. I began gathering information about these people. I was

warned that they were very closed off and did not let anyone into their community. But I thought that even if they did not accept me, I could at least observe them.

I invited a friend to come with me, and we set out. The bus dropped us off at the turn toward Novi Obikhody and drove away. At that moment, two sisters from the health center arrived. They were supposed to receive something from someone, but they did not receive it. They were upset and did not even look at us. It was an interesting first impression. Later, a car came for us, and I found myself in a special place where I began observing everything very carefully. I started getting acquainted with people, and my love was with me, but I did not yet know how it worked. I did not try to use it to its full power, nor did I know how. It was already doing its work, but I did not yet realize it. As a result, I became acquainted with everyone I possibly could and studied how the entire community functioned. I was very happy to have come to such a wonderful place.

Missionaries from Russia and from all over Ukraine came to the camp meeting and shared their experiences and needs. This also made a deep impression on me. I received great inspiration from that trip.

The Lord gave me many new friends, and I rejoiced that such changes had taken place in my life.

The “closed community” opened up to me, and I became one of them, which was a joy to realize.

But love draws me toward new discoveries, and I decided to go further.

The Lord opened a new chapter in my life, and I began reflecting on friendship—its depth, its influence, what it meant to me, and what it meant to be friendly. The love of Jesus gave me all these qualities; only certain conditions were needed for them to be revealed to me.

Limitless possibilities opened before me. The further I advanced in understanding this field of love and friendship, the

more fascinating it became to try new things and receive remarkable results.

At one point, I decided to become a true friend to all my friends and to remain their friend always. But I wanted to conduct an experiment, which I will describe in the next chapter. This experiment helped me discover and understand the laws of friendship and see the beauty of this remarkable bond.

The Lord began revealing to me the depth of friendship, and I saw how closely love and friendship should be intertwined in the Christian family of the last days. This is so important.

If my love finds a response in the heart of my brother or sister but does not lead us to friendship, something is not entirely right, and such a relationship needs to be reconsidered.

If our friendship is conditional, sooner or later it will end. Conditional friendship has no foundation; it has only boundaries that must not be crossed.

Unconditional friendship is a decision of my heart. It does not depend on anyone else, but only on how willing I am to be such a friend. Yet I do not have the strength within myself to love and befriend others unconditionally. Christ has that strength, and therefore I must always ask Him for it. And the Lord gives it—far more abundantly than I can imagine.

The gift of friendliness involves the influence of the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. Without Him, it is simply impossible to convince a stranger that you are his friend—one who loves at all times. But my friendship with my brothers and sisters in the faith is part of God’s plan, and therefore I can always rely on help from above in this work.

Jesus is the Very Best Friend. He desires to see His image in me as I interact with those around me. I will not disappoint Him. I will love, I will become a friend, and, if possible, the very best friend I can be.

Bible Verses for Reflection

John 15:14; 17:21; Daniel 9:23; 1 Samuel 19:1, 4; Zephaniah 2:3; 1 John 3:16; Acts 2:45–47.

## Friendship

Friendship has always seemed to me to be something very right and good. I did not have the courage to call someone a friend without good reason, because I understood that this title should be supported by a corresponding relationship.

For example, a comrade, an acquaintance, a casual friend, a colleague, a neighbor, or a coworker may all be good people, but they cannot be called friends. I may communicate with some of them more often and have a closer relationship with them than with my friends, but they do not have the status that signifies that a person holds a special place in my heart.

When I attended the camp meeting in Novi Obikhody in 2010, I noticed that I sat with the same people at every meal. When we eat together, we have an excellent opportunity to get to know one another better and talk about any subject. During my first visit, I had no particular plans for the event, but I noticed that the atmosphere of the gathering and the presence of the Holy Spirit prepared our hearts and opened them to closer relationships. This enabled us to become close to strangers very quickly and develop trusting relationships with them. Sharing a table made us feel like family simply because we had an hour and a half each day to talk about various subjects. What a blessing it was! This interaction united us as a group of like-minded people, and we became friends because it was pleasing to God. He took part in our fellowship. I registered for the following year, planning to visit that place again.

When I returned home, I began reflecting on what I had seen and experienced. I greatly enjoyed those gatherings and decided to conduct an experiment in intentionally making friends. I knew that the next time I went there, I would once again sit at a table with people I did not know, and I resolved to become their friend. I understood that this should not be merely a title, but a heartfelt decision—my personal choice and a particular status that would open my heart to a special relationship with those whose friend I had decided to become, joining my life to theirs forever in that role. In my

understanding, friendship is unconditional and stable. It was on the basis of this understanding that I decided to build relationships with whomever the Lord would send to my dining table.

I began praying for these people. A struggle arose in my heart. So many fears and doubts came crashing down upon me! What if this happened? What if that happened? Why do you need this? Just live a peaceful life! These and other thoughts crowded into my mind all at once. But I decided to pursue my goal and see what would happen. I asked for love and friendship toward people whom I did not yet know and could not even picture.

Then the day arrived. I returned to the “Our Home” health center, signed up for Table 13, and resolved to press on to victory. I came to a meal and saw my future friends sitting there. I greeted them and began my speech: “You are the answer to my prayer for you. I have decided to become your friend, and you have no chance of escaping this fate. This is my decision, and it is firm and unchangeable. It does not depend on what you decide...” I continued speaking in the same spirit and along the same lines.

If only you could have seen their faces. They displayed a mixture of surprise, indignation, resentment, confusion, and alienation. I realized that I had started yet another foolish undertaking, but there was no turning back. It is not my way to change my decisions and retreat. During those days, I heard and saw all kinds of reactions directed at me. The Lord had not sent me soft and fluffy friends, but the prickliest hedgehogs in the world. One sister named Veronika, however, had beamed like a sunflower from the moment we met and listened to me with pleasure. Yet she remained silent. And so the seminar on friendship began. At every meal, I talked about how wonderful it was to have such a friend and how our relationship would bring us joy throughout Eternity. In response, I heard smirks, requests that I be quiet, and declarations that I would never succeed. But every evening I prayed and asked Jesus to give me these people forever and open their hearts to our friendship. A difficult struggle was taking place in my soul, but I resolved to

continue to the very end and not surrender my position. The first day passed, then the second and the third. I kept preaching about love and friendship, but nothing changed. I felt like a strange person, but I continued giving myself to them. Then, on the fourth day, my friends from the health center invited me to have lunch with them. It was as though I had entered another world: smiles, joy, friendliness, and pleasant conversation. That evening, I went back to war at my own table to continue the battle. I sat down, ate in silence, and wondered how to advance further. Then they asked me, “Where have you been, our friend? We were lonely without you.” At that moment, something unusual began to happen. One after another, my friends began opening up. It was as though a dam had burst. Smiles appeared on their faces, and we began getting to know one another more closely. I began occupying the territory I had won and planting the banner of love and friendship there, because I knew we would soon part, but the banners of victory would go home with my friends.

How wonderful it was to experience the birth of new, close relationships, to enter open hearts, and to bring these people the joy of my love and friendship while respecting their freedom and considering their wishes. I had never imagined that such a thing was possible or how many blessings this friendship would bring to all of us.

I should add that we remain close friends to this day. These relationships have not fallen apart but remain strong. My heart is committed to permanence in this matter, even though we cannot always communicate continually and do not meet often. But Eternity lies ahead of us. There we will continue our friendship, come to know one another even more closely, and nothing will ever separate us again.

It was also interesting that before this trip, Sister Veronika—the one who had smiled at me from the very beginning—had prayed that the Lord would send friends to her husband, Oleg. The Lord answered our prayers and brought us together.

This experience opened a new chapter in my life and revealed a fascinating path to people’s hearts that I had not known before.

Now I understand perfectly what it means to “show oneself friendly” and why so many friends are appearing in my life. Whenever I begin this war to win new people, it always ends with new friends in my heart. It is so fascinating! It is so wonderful! These people will bring me joy throughout Eternity. There, our relationships will bear the eternal seal of God’s love. That seal is already present here, but freedom gives a friend the right to break this bond unilaterally. In Eternity, however, this will never happen.

Being a friend is God’s plan for each of us, and it is something worth learning. Unconditional love for people leads me to understand that our relationships must be formally established and given lifelong status. Friendship makes them right forever.

Friendship in Christ differs from worldly friendship, although they have much in common and are even called by the same name. But friendship in Christ is better and stronger because it is unconditional and filled with love and deep affection of the heart. It does not simply appear on its own. We must plead for it, study it, and tenderly preserve it in our hearts, because being unconditional requires considerable spiritual effort and many victories over self.

The life of Jesus is the very best example of friendship. He is the best and faithful Friend, Who knows how to love and be a Friend without any conditions. The Lord desires to teach each of us to do the same.

Bible Verses for Reflection

John 15:5; Proverbs 18:24; 19:11; 22:11; 25:17; 27:10, 17; Ecclesiastes 3:1, 6, 8; 4:9–10.

## A Friend

If you ask anyone who a friend is and what he imagines a friend to be like, each person will have his own understanding, which will differ somewhat from yours and mine. But if you ask people to think deeply and describe more fully the character of the friend they desire, every one of them will describe the character of Jesus, even if they know nothing about Him. Try asking the people close to you, and you will discover that people need a loving God Who understands their needs. The world is tired of conditions and deception. We live in a vast theater where everyone plays a role, while God has been portrayed as Someone Who has no concern for my needs and requires only obedience, appeasement, and worship.

Of course, there will also be people whose understanding of friendship reflects the extent of their own corruption. They imagine a friend to be a kindly millionaire uncle whose only dream is to support them and their entire family while caring solely about their needs.

But who is a friend? What should he be like? And what is friendship?

If I do not have a correct understanding of these things, I will invent one based on what I have heard in songs, seen in movies, and read in books. This image will satisfy my selfish impulses until I meet a true friend who destroys all my stereotypes while simply remaining himself, loving me, and accepting me as I am.

But what is a true friend really like? Have you ever thought about it? Each of us has had, or still has, a special emotional attachment to certain people. Sometimes this bond comes from childhood or our school years. Some people found a friend at church, while others found one among their neighbors or within their family. And some have no friends at all. Even if they do, death takes their friends away, leaving them completely alone.

Friend, where are you?! You must exist! Where can I find you?!

Some people have reached the point where they no longer need anyone. Even the truest friend would weary their soul and irritate a mind corrupted by sin.

But what is a true friend like? And why must he be true?

I often hear expressions such as these: “Be a friend and do this for me.” “If you are my friend, then act this way.” “Friends do not behave like that.” “My friend, buy this from me.” “Good morning, friends.”

We have all become accustomed to being addressed this way. Even in our school, I call you friends and nothing else. But I can say for myself that I do this consciously and truly regard you as friends. I understand what I am saying, even though I will never meet many of you personally. This form of address is customary in our society, and people do not think about what it means.

On social media, I have always been puzzled by the “Add Friend” or “Friends” feature. Anyone who adds me to his contact list can be placed under that label. I simply do not know many of them. And when strangers from Africa who do not even speak my language send me friend requests, it becomes quite amusing. I cannot change this, however, and I have grown accustomed to it.

Society has formed its own idea of a person’s friend and spread it thin across the whole sandwich of my understanding. I am surrounded by friends everywhere, even though I have never personally met many of them.

When a person hears that I want to become his friend, he simply does not understand where to add me so that I can remain somewhere in the background without interfering with his life. After all, the mind has grown accustomed to sending everyone into an archive and taking pleasure in bare statistics. Better yet, a person can start a YouTube channel, gather subscribers, call them friends, and entertain them with his videos.

I do not want to boast and desire to remain humble, but I will nevertheless say that I consider myself a true friend to those to

whom I have declared my friendship. I do not want merely to define this expression; I want to demonstrate through my personal example what it means to be a true friend.

I understand that if I have given a promise or my word of friendship, I must keep it. Even if my feelings tell me otherwise, I have already established this status in my heart as a principle governing my attitude toward people. I will not tell everyone that I am his friend, but once I have said it, I bear responsibility for those words. I understand what I am doing.

Being a friend is not very difficult. It means that I respect a person's freedom of choice and am prepared to take part in his life in whatever way, and to whatever degree of closeness, he allows. I respect his opinion, consider his interests and family circumstances, understand his needs, and look for opportunities to take part in his life. I can become a close friend only when the friend himself allows me to become one, but we will discuss this in another chapter.

Being a true friend means being myself while loving the person I have chosen as a friend. No one can force or persuade me to become someone's friend. I, too, am free in my choice and know how to make it. This is not merely a decision; it is also my responsibility before my friend and before God. I always ask God to bless every friendship I have with people so that it may also bear the seal of His approval.

I will say at once that I have different kinds of friends. There are even some who hate me and wish me harm. But I cannot reject them, because I remember the good days when we were friends and understood one another. At times, this makes life difficult, but I cannot change my attitude. I would rather make a mistake on the side of love and friendship than remove a person from my life. I am not saying that this is right or that everyone should act this way, but it is my decision, and it makes life easier for me. I can be honest with everyone, even when I do not have enough time and strength for them all.

A friend has a special place in my heart—a place that is not limited by a fixed number of shelves or by my abilities. Into this

place, I welcome the living souls of the people I have chosen as friends so that I may be true to them throughout my life. I plan to remain that way throughout Eternity. I cannot imagine friendship with conditions. How could that be friendship? It would merely be a business relationship that ends when the business is over. To me, friendship is something eternal.

Conditions can apply only to how a relationship is conducted. For example, I am a married man and have a wife. Then I gain a new friend—a sister in Jesus. I begin being her friend, but within the boundaries of my marital status, remaining faithful to my wife even in my thoughts. This is my condition, and I have no intention of violating it. But if this sister allows herself to desire something more, sins before God in her heart, and wishes to cross this boundary, I will then have to explain to her in detail that I fear God, do not approve of such an approach, and will not commit such evil, while still remaining her friend.

Feelings will pass, but the principle will remain.

Very often, my friendship helps sustain people when everything in their lives is falling apart. They understand that I am the only one who has not abandoned them, and they open their hearts to me. Then I can help them in whatever ways are within my power. This happens often.

There are also friends who simply do not need me. I see it, and it hurts, but I decide to continue loving them and to wait for the time when perhaps something in their attitude will change.

I took the way Jesus relates to me as my example of friendship and decided to relate to my friends in the same way. I rejoice in the constancy with which He loves me. He understands, and I learn from Him. I want His image to be reflected in me, and I believe this is right. Friendship is forever.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Proverbs 17:17; Psalm 91:14–16; 46:1; 62:11; Luke 15:20; 1 John 4:10–11; Psalm 126:5–6; Isaiah 54:2–3.

## A Close Friend

As I study the laws of friendship and receive this gift from God, I understand that ultimately everything comes down to the fact that I must make a choice and do something about it. If I shut myself off from the entire world and take no action, nothing will happen. A talent must be put to work and produce the influence that has been placed within it.

As I invest my strength and my heart in my friends, I do not know what I will receive in return. But the law of sowing and reaping tells me that cactus plants do not grow from seeds of love, and friends will grow from seeds of friendship. I am surrounded by living people who long for love. I simply need to find the key to each heart, and then it will open to me forever. In that case, I can place as much love and happiness as I desire into these treasuries of the soul.

Yet among all these friends are some who are especially close to you. How can I understand who my close friend is? How can I distinguish him from the others? Why did he become close? Why cannot everyone be close?

We know that God has no favorites, and I often hear this statement. But what does it mean? Is it true? How should we understand Romans 9:13: “As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated”? What kind of partiality is this?

It is not for me to judge God or decide how He sees us. But I know that the Savior’s attitude toward the righteous differs from His attitude toward sinners. He loves both, but He is friends only with the righteous. Among the righteous, some are closer to Him because they desire to know His will. Others have believed but have not understood in Whom they have believed. They do not know what to do next and have no desire to take any action.

Love and friendship are two sisters. They look very much alike, but they have different purposes and exert different influences upon the heart. We are told to love our enemies, pray for those who mistreat us, and bless those who curse us, but we are not

told to be friends with them. Love acts in the same way toward both friends and enemies. It loves these people and responds to them only in the right spirit, receiving its strength from Christ.

Friendship involves my heartfelt attachment to another person. It singles a friend out from among millions of other people and makes him my friend.

One day, a coworker asked me to drive him to a car lot so that he could choose something to buy. The salesman immediately declared that we were friends and continued calling us that throughout our visit. His heart appeared open to something more, and he seemed so sincerely glad to see us. But when my coworker made it clear that he would not buy anything, I was surprised by the way our new friend began to behave. In the end, he did not even say goodbye to us. I think that even if we had bought something, our newly acquired friend would have forgotten us immediately. Yet he himself had called us friends, and when such words are spoken, I understand them according to their true meaning. There are many other forms of address that express respect toward a stranger, but for some reason people call everyone a friend, diminishing the meaning of the word.

Jesus said in John 15:14, “Ye are My friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.” The Lord made it clear that Heaven does not call everyone a friend. But once a person has received this status, it does not change. We can then read what Judas was called during his betrayal. Matthew 26:49–50 says: “And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, Master; and kissed Him. And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come? Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus, and took Him.”

But if a friend can become a traitor, whom can I call a close friend? To be close means to be very near, right here beside me. A close friend is someone very dear to me in spirit and through personal affection. But how can this be determined? Perhaps it is the person who talks to me more than anyone else about his friendship and love? Yet I may listen to him out of respect without returning his feelings. I may even simply

tolerate him because he is a friend. It would be wonderful if he would just be quiet, but I let him speak. My characteristics differ from those of my friend, but I accept him as he is and have no intention of changing him. However, once I understand the law of closeness, I begin to view all this differently.

A close friend is someone to whom I can tell everything that is in my heart, knowing that he will simply listen. It is someone to whom I can entrust my secrets, knowing that he will not reveal them to others but will help resolve whatever is within his power. It is someone who always finds time for me and never condemns me. It is someone who respects my freedom and loves me.

Please notice how I have reversed all my definitions of a friend. If a friend is someone whom I treat as I described earlier, then a close friend is someone who treats me as I have just described.

A close friend is not someone who has revealed his secrets to me while I am not ready to entrust him with mine. It is the other way around. Closeness in friendship is determined not by the amount of time we communicate, but by the trust we express toward one another in our relationship.

In our school, we can see how many students open their hearts in their answers. They do this daily and sincerely, and then they allow other people to look inside them as well.

I can say with confidence that I have become a close friend to many of them. I do not share as much with them in return, but I receive what they reveal to me. You do not hear every answer, and not every secret from our conversations is made public. But because I understand this law of closeness, I rejoice that the Lord gives me such friends, and I believe this brings a mutual blessing. How easy it is to communicate with a close friend and help him. His heart is already open to you. He has no one else whom he can trust. Therefore, such friends should be valued and tenderly preserved in the heart.

The School of Love teaches us to love. If this spirit comes upon us in our relationships with one another, we should not resist it. It is a gift from the Lord.

But the closest Friend of all is, of course, Jesus. He is ready to listen to all my secrets, problems, needs, and anxieties. He will never cast me out or say that He has no time. He will listen to everything very attentively, embrace me, comfort me, gently stroke me, hold me close to Himself, and carry me in His arms. Although this is invisible, it can be felt by the heart.

He is the One Who showed me such closeness. When I began treating my friends in the same way, I saw that it worked. But a friend may refuse this closeness. He may make it clear that he is not interested in understanding my problems and secrets. Although this hurts, it does not trouble me. I understand that he is free to make his own decision, and I see that we are simply friends, not close friends. Then I take all these things to Jesus and rejoice that He is the closest Friend of all.

Throughout my life, I have learned to resolve all my problems with Jesus so well that I do not burden my friends with them. They cannot help me in the way He can. Yet the Lord is not opposed to our bearing one another’s burdens.

We have been given to one another for love and close relationships, because through them God can very easily convey His truths to us and reveal His loving character. Everyone will know that we are His disciples if we have love for one another.

It is good to have close friends, but it is especially wonderful to be a close friend to others as well.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Luke 12:4; John 15:15; 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7; 11:5; Mark 10:21; John 13:1.

## The Best Friend

My understanding of friendship and love will always differ from the way others see and imagine them. And that is right. God Himself created us to be very different, and therein lies the special beauty of the human race. If I begin declaring that there are only two opinions—mine and the wrong one—I will have serious problems communicating with people.

The human worldview has a particular quality: a diversity of views and preferences. When they are brought together into one overall picture, they help us see many things from every side and in all their complexity.

Each of us understands closeness differently. When considering who my close friend is, I must take into account which love language I use in communicating with him and how much love I invest in our friendship.

Love is the strongest adhesive capable of joining very different hearts into one. Even when our preferences and views are completely alike, I will still have my own opinion, distinct from the opinions of others.

If a million people were asked to describe water to me without using the word itself, I can say with confidence that they would all correctly describe the same thing, yet among all those answers, not even two would be identical word for word.

The world has an expression: “Whom are we going to unite against?” The world will always impose its own definition upon every blessing of God.

“Tell me who your friend is, and I will tell you who you are.” Can I be judged by my friend? There are patterns of influence for good or evil that my friends may exert upon me and that I may exert upon them. If I bring happiness, love, and friendship into my friend’s life and he receives them, I may have a stronger influence on him than he has on me.

It is written that evil associations corrupt good character, and we are warned to avoid those who can spoil our character and

teach us to do evil while calling it good. Such influence is real, and the enemy of souls uses it. God does not call me to rebuild Babylon or construct a church on the Titanic. But God has a plan to save people who are perishing, and He desires me to take an active part in it.

For all time, God has given the world the Very Best Friend to save it from the power of sin. The example of how Jesus loves and how kindly He treats those who hate and persecute Him will always be a model for me to follow. As I put His principles and the gift of agape love into practice in my life, I see how they first influence me and change my character. When I become someone's friend, I change. A transformation takes place in my life, and I understand that I need special new wisdom to communicate and build a relationship with a new person. And God gives it to me.

Love is remarkable because, like water, it completely fills the form of another person's perception. It does not try to change him but takes every feature of his character into account. Love finds elements in a friend's soul that soften through prolonged contact with it, absorb its essence, and dissolve within it. They are transformed into something new. Water wears away stone, and love reshapes the soul.

I am always amazed by the love of Jesus for us—for so many different people. He approaches a person and begins communicating with him at the level of that person's understanding and perception. He respects the opinions of others so deeply that He never enters into an argument. Instead, He listens very attentively and then gently offers His point of view, observing the person's response.

The example of Jesus in His relationships with people always has been and always will be the perfect model to admire and follow. Yet my experiences and discoveries in love and friendship are not the final authority on truth. I am a limited human being, completely dependent upon God's mercy and power, yet I desire with all my heart to take part in transforming the lives of others for God's glory.

If I dream of becoming someone's most dependable friend and most loving brother and ask God for the strength to do so, this does not mean that everyone must think and act the same way. In my understanding, "the most" does not mean the only one; it means someone who stands apart from others. I give this expression the meaning of true and genuine. Perhaps I idealize many things, but I try to compare everything with the example of Christ. As I love the way He loves, I grow, and my understanding grows as well.

Communion with Jesus transforms me. He shows me how the Best Friend in the world loves, and I try to act in the same way. Then I am able to see what God's love accomplishes.

Without love, my friendship and my attitude toward people will become a temptation to me, and my motive will reflect my human interests.

Love without friendship is possible. Love is the most proper attitude toward every person. But friendship without love is an entirely different product from friendship that contains love. For example, if a person who lives according to the flesh studies the chapter about a close friend and decides to apply it in his life, this law will operate, and he will see a result. But where will that result lead?

If I drive a tank to capture enemy territory and know how to operate the machine, what will happen if my enemy gets into that tank? I do not think he will act according to my understanding, even though the tank's mechanisms will obey the enemy just as well.

Friendship is a very powerful means of advancing when it is in loving hands. But in the understanding of the flesh, it becomes a highly complex mechanism that continues to operate in a different direction. Then everyone, including God, is blamed for the irreparable destruction and severe consequences that follow.

Without love, my friendship is very dangerous. It has no solid foundation and may crack and collapse under any trial, burying trusting souls beneath it.

In this sense, Jesus is the Best Friend. He will not fall, turn His weapons against His friends, betray them, or disappoint them. We can be friends with Him. He is strong and steadfast at all times. He will withstand every trial while remaining just as tender and loving.

I can always compare myself with Jesus and bring my views into harmony with His standards. I can even imitate absolutely everything He does without fear, but it is best to do all of it with love.

The enemy of souls desired to be like the Most High—not in character, but in strength and authority. And he failed.

To be like Jesus does not mean having the same hairstyle and clothing. It means studying His character and putting these discoveries into practice in my life.

For me, Christ's attitude toward me is the example of true love and friendship. I discovered these principles, tried them in my relationships with friends and many different people, and saw that they work and bring blessings. It is so remarkable.

The greatest miracle in the entire universe is that I love. At times, I can hardly believe such a thing is possible, but I see all this power and influence. They are not mine, yet I claim them as my own by right of the new birth and make myself an instrument of God through which this treasure can be given to a thirsty world.

The Best Friend is that very best Jesus, and no one can be more dependable than He is. So forgive me, friends, but Jesus is better than you. I am not ashamed to say it, nor do I intend to offend you by it. After all, He is the One Who gives me friendship and love for you so that you may be made happy by their touch.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Psalm 62:5–9; Matthew 18:11; 11:19; John 8:10–11, 15–16; 11:11, 43; 12:7; 20:27; 21:17; Luke 19:5; Matthew 26:32.

## Distinctive Features of Friendship

In the Russian translation of the New Testament, God's new commandment is expressed with words meaning, "Love one another." The Russian words used for "one another" literally convey the idea of one person loving another, but I would like to deepen this expression and understand it as "a faithful friend loving a faithful friend." The nature of the Russian language makes this possible. This definition contains the true principle of agape love, through which we have a deep relationship with one another that leads us into mutual friendship forever.

Love for another person contains an element of happiness, though at times it may be only one-sided. But love for a friend—especially one who responds with love arising from his own principle—brings a special joy to the heart.

Friends are different, and they have different characters. If I have several close friends who return my friendship, this does not mean that they also have warm relationships with one another. They may not even know each other, and after meeting, they may still form no close bond.

The commandment of love tells me that I must have agape love for my friend and that he must have agape love for me. Then this relationship will testify to the entire world that we are disciples of Christ. Unconditional friendship within this unconditional love is precisely the kind of relationship Jesus desires to see among us.

He is ready to teach this to everyone. I am not born with such knowledge, nor do I arrive at this understanding automatically. If I allow the Holy Spirit to change my heart so that I can love my friend, my mind automatically places a condition upon such a relationship—a condition beginning with "if." I am ready to love you with agape love if you become what I believe you should be. This conditional attitude will reveal itself in all my relationships. But when I ask God to teach me to be a friend and to love properly, I see in the example of Jesus unconditional love and heartfelt affection for those who allowed Him to know

them. I decide to apply the same principle in my own life. I see God opening before me boundless possibilities and the indescribable love of His ocean of love. The seal of God's approval adheres very well to a solid surface that does not change with moods or circumstances.

A friend is not my personal property given to me by God as a gift of life in Jesus. A friend is a free individual with his own characteristics and rights. The status of friend describes the relationship between us, but it does not mean that our property and money have become common possessions. Friendship does not even imply that the members of our families have now become friends. Friendship is you and me, joined by a one-sided or mutual decision to be friends. At the same time, we respect the boundaries of friendship to which each of us has a right.

Here is an example. One day, I was working near my friend's home and, without thinking, said that I would now come to his house for lunch, although I had no intention of actually doing so. He responded very sharply that while he was away, I had no right to cross the threshold of his home. I was surprised by such a harsh response, took note of the warning, and afterward never again even hinted that I might have any contact with the members of his household. I have maintained that distance to this day. Another friend, however, earnestly asks me to communicate with his wife because afterward peace, love, and mutual respect return to their home. I gladly do so when nothing prevents it. Having had such different experiences, I cannot offer a universal rule for relationships with friends. But I understand that those relationships must remain within the boundaries of personal freedom established between us.

When I board the train of trust, I do not check my mind as baggage. I have friends who once decided that all my possessions were our common property, while everything they possessed remained their private property. Since I live in Germany, they believed I was obligated to provide for their well-being. Such an approach to friendship tells me that they see me as a free gas station. I must gently explain to my friends that even in Germany, there are different people who live in

different ways. Even if I possess something, I alone have the right to decide what I can give to someone or present as a gift.

The same applies to spiritual matters. I have my own personal understanding and order for arranging my life—how, when, and for how long I should do one thing or another. My personal relationship with Jesus belongs only to Him and me. No one else can enter that relationship except through prayer. Yet in all these matters, I also listen to what my friends say, desire, expect, or advise.

We influence one another, and at times this helps us do very good things that would never have been accomplished alone. But not every friend is competent in every matter. If my friend wants to help me with electrical work without understanding it, I would rather turn to an unbelieving specialist who can resolve the problem professionally. In the spiritual sphere, however, I can ask for help or offer help myself even when I am not an expert, while learning from Jesus to do something I have never done before. The Lord will teach me. Even learning friendship must begin at some point. Throughout this process, it is very important to be honest with one another.

For example, my friends sometimes tell me that they know I am continually praying for them, and they thank me for it. I prayed for them when there was a need, but I do not do so without ceasing. Yet I do not want to disappoint them, so I simply remain silent, burning with shame because I have betrayed their confidence in me and dreaming that I will certainly correct myself. But when I am honest, I tell them everything as it truly is and try not to bind myself with long-term obligations. At times, this saddens my friends and disappoints their expectations of me.

I do not want to play the role of a super-friend. I understand that I am a weak person with my own views on life and relationships. At the same time, I very often need to examine my heart and ask God to remove dangerous deficiencies and flaws. And I am learning. Even the principles of faithfulness, unconditionality, and constancy did not come to me without a struggle. At times, I wanted to break off everything with

someone and forget him forever, but the Lord showed me that He does not treat me that way. The learning process in the School of Love does not always bring me joy and pleasure. Sometimes I complain to Jesus about the difficulties I encounter because they are too much for me. Then He extends His hands to me, as though asking whether I desire to receive such a reward for my love and friendship. I humble myself and understand that I still have much to learn.

Close friends are people who share a trusting relationship, but this does not make me another person's shadow. Even Jesus respects my freedom and the desires of every person. How humbly He offers the riches of Heaven, and how joyfully He shares them with those who long to receive them.

Friendship and friendliness are gifts from Heaven. They are worth asking for and learning. Once we have learned them, we should pass them on to others, making those people our friends. It is a miracle when a stranger enters your life as a friend and takes his place in your heart for the rest of your life. What could be better? Only mutual love for one another according to the commandment.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Ecclesiastes 4:9–10, 12; Revelation 3:20; John 15:17; 17:26; Philippians 2:3; 1 John 1:7; Proverbs 8:33–35; Isaiah 58:7–11; Luke 16:9–10; 1 John 3:23.

## Do Not Be Afraid to Be Truthful

Perhaps the most difficult thing I experience in my Christian life is finding the courage to tell the whole truth about myself that I know. I always become tense when I realize that another person is speaking openly about my problem.

The most interesting thing happens when I begin serving publicly and teaching other people something that I do not yet possess or understand myself. Yet the very essence of learning often lies in the fact that if a person wants to understand something better, he needs to begin teaching it to others.

The people close to me understand very well who I am. Even if I have skillfully disguised my true nature, it will still reveal itself.

But when I begin personal communion with God, the same habit of appearing better than I truly am also reveals itself in our relationship. I want to prove to God that I am good, that He should rejoice in my good deeds and carefully take note of them. I even try to imagine that I am becoming His special favorite because I do everything correctly and better than others.

But when God begins to convict me and places me in situations where my foolishness comes to the surface and becomes obvious to everyone, including me, I seek excuses instead of admitting my weakness or guilt. Or, even worse, I shift my guilt onto others, making them accomplices in my sins or blaming them as the primary cause of those sins.

When circumstances finally back me into a corner, I decide to be honest and admit my mistakes. It seems to me that I have revealed something new about myself and therefore deserve special mercy or respect because I have admitted my guilt and declared it openly. But if I am required to bear the consequences of my wrongdoing, my indignation knows no bounds. How can anyone treat me this way?! I sincerely confessed and repented, so they should simply forgive me and forget my failures. Yet they demand that I pay for the damage, pay a fine, or bear the consequences of my sin for the rest of my

life. What a flagrant injustice!!! After all, I repented and confessed!!! Is that not enough?! How inhumanely they are treating me!

To be a true friend, we should learn to be honest with other people. We tend to idealize those who possess special talents, gifts, an attractive appearance, or apparent spirituality. If such a person is famous, then anything can be forgiven him. He simply cannot be a bad person because society has recognized him as unique, and unique people do not make mistakes.

And so I maintain a friendship, but at some point I realize that everything is coming apart at the seams. I am surrendering my position, and my stability is suffering serious damage. Instead of admitting it and asking for a break while explaining that I am dealing with personal problems, I begin searching for countless excuses. I try to preserve my image and avoid embarrassing myself. My friends believe me, seek to understand me in their love, and overlook my failures and mistakes. I take advantage of their trust and “throw dust in their eyes” to strengthen their respect for me.

Hypocrisy sometimes helps me escape unscathed and preserve my status. A friend knows how to love and forgive, so I may abuse his trust while expecting his mercy.

Jesus always loves me, and He knows everything. I soothe my conscience by asking Him to forgive me, a sinner, without trying to identify my sins specifically or examine them more deeply in the light of God’s disapproval. Then I wonder why there are no blessings in my life, and I have to invent them in order to impress others and maintain my status at the proper level.

And so I am forced to live this way. The most interesting thing is that I am surrounded by actors just like me, with the same ideas, ambitions, and worldview. Together we perform in a vast theater, waiting for applause and receiving the respect we believe we deserve. Then we go home, lock ourselves in our rooms, and suffer from loneliness.

Ceasing to be deceitful is a heroic achievement in our time. Accomplishing it requires power from above, the gift of repentance, and an understanding of our true condition in the light of God's will.

When I become a friend to another person, openness and honesty are expected of me in our relationship. But this does not mean that I must reveal every secret and detail of my life to my friend or enter into every area of his life. There will always be private places that must remain forever closed to outside eyes. Even if someone wishes to enter them, I may politely make it clear that within this territory I desire to remain as I am and that no one has the right to intrude. For example, the spiritual atmosphere of my bedroom and my intimate relationship with my wife are precisely such a place, which no friend of mine will ever enter under any circumstances. There are many such areas into which even close friends should not be casually invited.

But Jesus is welcome everywhere. He is already omnipresent, yet His omniscience does not oppress me with condemnation. On the contrary, the Lord very gently points out the details of my imperfection that He would like to correct in me.

When I decide to be honest with the people close to me, I must not insult or harm them in the process. For example, if someone irritates me while I smile pleasantly at him and wish him abundant blessings, honesty toward that person does not mean telling him to his face everything I think about him or pouring all my disgust and indignation upon him. I should not tell him what I believe he truly is while adding that I am being completely honest and am also right. Such an understanding of honesty is called foolishness and idiocy. I think all my friends would quickly run away from me, and from their perspective, they would be right.

True honesty means that I first begin working things out with Jesus and seek to understand why my friend irritates me. I try to see what I need to change in my attitude. Then I admit to my friend that I do not understand his behavior and that this is creating difficulties in our relationship. I tell him that I would

like to resolve them but need outside help and more reliable information about what I consider wrong or irritating. Tact and respect for another person are inseparable parts of Christian ethics and love. All negativity toward another person comes from an impure source. But if a person’s deeds are evil, that is an entirely different matter and deserves attention if there is an opportunity to help or correct something.

Being truthful does not mean calling myself insulting names and pronouncing curses upon my mistakes and sins. It means loving myself as a person redeemed by the blood of Christ. Truthfulness is admitting that I am a sinner who needs a Savior and is learning to be kind and loving.

Without Christ, I will not be able to correct my habits and will continue in hypocrisy, if it is present in me. It is like the color of my skin, which I am unable to change and do not even wish to change.

If the people close to me have exalted me in their eyes, I need courage to admit that I am what God shows me to be. Love knows how to correct this and does so without harming either my friends or me, opening new paths to renewal in the truth.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Jeremiah 17:9; Psalm 139:23–24; 1 Timothy 4:16; Acts 5:31–32; James 5:16; 4:10; Proverbs 15:33; Psalm 138:6; Proverbs 2:5–11; Matthew 26:31–35.

## Choosing a Friend

You can never have too many friends. A friendly heart is like the sun. Beautiful flowers from God's garden reach toward it, and weeds also need sunlight. If God has endowed me with this gift, I am destined to gain more friends whenever I come into contact with people.

At times, we are all actors and want to present our best side. But when a person is kind and friendly, it is impossible for him to play the role of someone mean and unsociable. It would be like trying to hide a burning candle inside your coat or failing to notice a city standing on top of a hill. Even if I desire to be left alone among my friends, there will always be those who greatly desire to communicate with me, rejoice in seeing me, and seek my presence.

I began noticing that among the multitude of people, there are always certain special individuals. It can safely be said that they bring happiness simply by standing or being nearby. Even when they merely pass by, everything suddenly feels wonderful. Yet they do not know this and would never guess it. I cannot explain this phenomenon, but some people bring blessings into my life simply through their presence. However, I cannot take advantage of this or ask them to stand beside me. I accept what God gives me through chance encounters or through these people's decisions to be near me. I never tell them about what I experience because I do not want to make anyone uncomfortable. Perhaps this is only a feature of my own perception. Therefore, I learn to wait patiently for the next unexpected meeting or for the next time they happen to be near me.

But I know that we resemble one another in certain ways, and others probably experience the same thing in relation to me. It is very interesting to observe the people you love—to see how they respond when they meet you, what expressions appear on their faces, and how they reveal their feelings.

The commandment to love one another is beautiful because when we both obey it, it blesses us in the fullness of its beauty. It opens vast possibilities for happiness in communication and in our mutual love for one another. This is exactly what the Lord planned when He gave me this command. It is an order to be happy and to make my friend happy as well. That is how it is, and that is how it works in the life of everyone who sets out upon this beautiful path. The path of love and friendship is magnificent.

Those who bring joy to your heart belong to the category of welcome people whose company simply feels good. Time spent with such individuals can be considered full, meaningful, and beautifully used for the benefit of the soul.

Friends are the Lord’s reward for the love you ask Him to give you for them. They are a part of your heart living in another person’s life.

Have any of you experienced taking a small child by his tiny hand so that you could walk somewhere together? At that moment, you experience remarkable feelings. This little being has entrusted his life to you. He has placed his tiny hand in yours. He believes in you. You have been allowed to hold this little person and spend time with him. You walk along, receiving indescribable pleasure simply from holding this child’s hand. Then suddenly, he decides to walk on his own, pulls away, and finds something else to do. Friends sometimes behave in the same way, filling your heart with special, inexplicable experiences. Without even noticing it, we rejoice in these little celebrations of love.

If you have a friend who continually tells you of his love, brings pleasant feelings to your heart, and also rejoices in you, thank God for such a gift. Be happy that you have such a friend.

Have you noticed how quickly flowers open toward the sun? How they reach for the light and how beautiful they look beneath those life-giving rays? Human hearts open in exactly the same way when your love and friendship touch them and begin warming them continually with their light and warmth.

There is no reason to play the role of a mean and unsociable person if you are kind by nature. It will not work. And why would you want to do it? Let your God-given gift of friendliness find new hearts into which it can pour special blessings.

But people are different, and I have not been deprived of freedom of choice. If I see that a person is deliberately distancing himself from me, I do not tear down those walls but remain polite and patient. If even my friend has no need of me, that too becomes evident, and I must respect his choice.

If a person has sinful intentions and wants to draw me into his schemes by exploiting my trust and friendliness, then despite my love for him, I make it clear that our interests and principles are incompatible and that we should not spend time together.

The request “Be a friend” tells me that I am not really a friend but am expected to become one briefly in order to carry out some task and then return to the category of distant acquaintances.

When God gives me the gift of friendliness, He does not take away my freedom to choose friends or obligate me to maintain some special relationship with them from that point forward. I simply begin treating people as Jesus does—in unexpectedly kind and proper ways.

Evil company and associations can corrupt my good character. When I see that such an influence is present and directed against me, I take measures to remain faithful to God.

For example, I decided that the status of my friend lasts for life. Then a friend suddenly began behaving wickedly toward me or toward God. I continued to regard him as my friend and could not simply take him and throw him out of my heart. But I arranged our relationship so that while remaining his friend, I would not damage my soul or allow him to abuse my trust.

Jesus assured us that we are His friends if we do what He has commanded us. This condition does not reveal partiality in Him. Its purpose is to prevent us from abusing this friendship and to

help us see the clear boundaries of what is expected and permitted.

For example, if my friend suddenly decides to create his own family with my wife, I do not think that would be a very friendly act on his part. Afterward, I would be very cautious and attentive in my communication with him, giving him no opportunity or support for his plans.

Of course, the members of my family are the first people whom I desire to have as my lifelong friends. If circumstances separate us, our friendship will help us maintain our relationship in the right spirit throughout our lives.

If I am single and decide to start a family, I should look not merely for a wife but for a lifelong friend who loves God—someone with whom I can then walk through life while remaining a friend. Not every female friend will be suitable to become such a close companion, but the Lord opens these paths to those who seek such a decision in God and in obedience to His will.

If my children regard me as a friend, it is easier to influence them and teach them obedience and faithfulness to God’s principles. In this matter, I should apply the full gift of friendliness so that I may gain faithful friends in my children. This is possible if I am honest and loving.

Like attracts like. A person who does not want friendship with me will quickly make that clear. Even if such people have already entered my heart and become my friends, their unwillingness to maintain the friendship will be recognized and taken into consideration.

Loving friends should be loved and made joyful by our love. And this is from the Lord.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Philippians 1:9; 2:5; Hebrews 5:14; Proverbs 25:17; 26:18–19; 27:14; 18:24; Matthew 5:45–48; 1 Corinthians 5:8–11; 15:33; John 15:14; James 4:4–5; Romans 12:15–16; Proverbs 12:26; Job 6:14.

## The Family—The Center of Friendship

This chapter, like all the others, is one of the most important and necessary chapters to understand and absorb.

If you simply read it and notice nothing, perhaps the time has not yet come for you to receive this material.

I want to present the main question of this chapter at the beginning so that you can try to answer it before I give you the answer.

What is the purpose of creating a family?

I very often ask this question of those who are planning to marry, those who are already married, and those who are preparing to divorce. Almost every time, I realize that people have no goal. They simply live without knowing where they are going, or they live according to what society considers normal. Every person has his own ideas about family. Some associate it with joy and happiness, others with bitter experiences, and still others with disappointment. Before the wedding, however, everything was different. Everything was wonderful for everyone. Sin destroys even the strongest relationships. Once you set foot on this destructive path, you can no longer stop. You do not know how to end it, and your entire life rushes rapidly downward into the depths of something unknown.

What should you do? Do you want to have a happy family? I know what a family should not be, and I gladly help those who have become confused and disappointed.

I believe divorce is the worst solution to family problems, and it is better not to let matters reach that point. Why should a marriage be dissolved? Did you have a common goal toward which you walked together in unity, bringing each other joy through your discoveries?

Why do you need a family? The usual answers sound like this: I am tired of living alone. I want something new. It is better to be together than alone. I want a child. I want my own house or apartment. I want sex within marriage. I am afraid of being

alone in old age. We will serve together. We will come to know God together and establish a family altar. I need someone to cook so I will not have to cook for myself. I want a woman. I need a man in the house. I am tired of living in poverty. I want to buy many things and travel, but I need someone who will pay for it. We will believe in God together. I do not know what a family is for; everyone lives this way, so I need to do it too.

These answers are not invented; they come from real life. This list could be continued. Such expectations and desires arise both before marriage and during married life. There is nothing wrong with them, yet we still need to understand the very essence of creating a family. Why is it needed? What is it? What purpose did God have when He created the first married couple? There is an ultimate purpose in God's plan for the family: through it, to reveal God's character and love to the entire universe.

But what is necessary for this? Which path should we choose? How can we reach this purpose if we have no goal and no understanding of what it means to reveal God's character?

We begin trying everything we consider right. We gain extensive experience in everyday family life, traditions, unfulfilled expectations, and bitter disappointments. Sometimes we encounter happy families that live peacefully and carry out their small daily tasks.

But so that we do not continue guessing, let us state the correct answer.

The purpose of creating a family is to come to know one another more closely.

I did not invent this. It is God's plan for humanity.

However simple this task may sound, its meaning is very deep. The more you think about it, the more deeply you understand it.

What do you hear in the expression "knowing Christ"? The entire essence of Christianity and the mystery of Eternal life are contained in this expression. We read in John 17:3: "And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God,

and Jesus Christ, Whom Thou hast sent." These are the words of Jesus Himself. He revealed the purpose of my Christian journey and established the direction I should follow.

Let us apply this principle to the family. We are to come to know one another, discovering new abilities, talents, character traits, and distinctive qualities within ourselves. The heart of my life companion is a wellspring of endless discoveries and possibilities. This is a process that has a beginning but never ends. Even if death separates us, an endless Eternity opens before us, and we continue coming to know one another. This is a small illustration of true knowledge—the knowledge of God Himself and of Jesus Christ, Whom He sent. Every other goal will eventually be reached, and then I will be disappointed in my expectations. I will be saddened because there is nothing more toward which I can strive.

God designed the family to be the center and demonstration of true friendship through deep cooperation in coming to know one another. Everything is taken into account here, and in one form or another, we encounter the same trials we will face from outside the family. God has given me for life a person whom I do not know at all. My task throughout my life is to keep discovering in my life companion a friend, a wife, a helper, an opponent, an independent person, and much more, using the knowledge I gain for the good of our family and our common work. Along this path of life, children are born to us. They grow up and leave. We buy some things and throw others away. We travel somewhere and return. We build houses and buy apartments. We serve, believe, and doubt. We fall and rise again. We bury one another and grieve while awaiting a beautiful reunion in Heaven, where we will continue our discoveries and know even as I am known.

Our mutual and voluntary study of one another leads us to unconditional friendship, because it is impossible not to be friends with someone you know very well. True friendship begins in the family. At least, this is how God designed it.

But what do we see in our families? I live with someone I do not know at all. I have neither interest in him nor time for him, and

he responds to me in the same way. Throughout our lives, we try to correct one another and defend our own rights while knowing the other person's duties. We establish rules and then break them ourselves. Finally, exhausted by this entire family nightmare, we begin dreaming about things that are better left unspoken.

Yet the key to happiness is very near. But both people must take it and open their hearts to one another. If I alone open my heart, I may expose myself to even greater attacks. Nevertheless, this step is worth taking.

Of course, some people have already found this goal and are confidently moving toward it. Even so, it is worth stating again and understanding with both the heart and the mind. If I am guided only by intuition in this direction, I will most likely lose my way one day and reach a dead end. But a clear understanding and vision of the goal will help me maintain the right course and always return to it whenever I deviate.

Friendship within the family is an entire field of knowledge that should be studied together. We should comprehend its depth, discover its mysteries, and recognize its advantages. Friendship should be the starting point of a relationship. We should strengthen our position as a friend and continue doing so after the wedding.

A wedding is not the end of friendship or the beginning of dull, ordinary family life. It is the path of great discoveries in the heart of the person who has chosen to walk beside you through life, becoming one with you.

Love for oneself also includes the person closest to us, with whom we are one flesh. How can I refuse to love myself or be friends with myself? If my head hurts, I should not cut it off. It is better to treat it and continue living with it.

The honeymoon is an interesting invention, but it has no biblical foundation in God's plans. The time of coming to know one another should continue throughout life. Deep acquaintance with a friend has a lawful beginning, but it has no end. How can you not be friends with someone you know so well?

Consider 1 Peter 3:5, 7; Colossians 1:9; and Hebrews 13:20–21 in the light of this chapter.

Bible Verses for Reflection

John 17:3; Genesis 2:24; Song of Solomon 1:5, 8, 14–15; 2:2, 16; 5:16; Ephesians 4:15–16; 5:28, 33; 1 Peter 3:5, 7; Colossians 1:9; Hebrews 13:20–21.

## A Loving Friend

And now I love, and I understand what love is. I do not seek my own interests, boast, or envy, and I love at all times. This is a very good condition of the soul. It fills life with meaning, happiness, and constant delight. It heals the soul and produces a spirit of gratitude for everything that happens.

Your Love never fails. How deeply you desire those whom you love at least to believe this, to believe in you, and to begin receiving and enjoying your love.

How wonderful it is to meet someone who has a love for you that can be called agape.

Let us imagine what this is like.

Your friend tells you that he loves you. He says it freely, expecting nothing in return. He has made this decision for himself and lives according to his choice. He demands nothing in exchange but looks for opportunities to put his love into action and somehow make you happy. As usually happens, you do not believe that he is sincere, but just in case, you test him. You want to discover how deep this love is and whether it is genuine. Your response may take many forms: ridicule, insults, indifference, aggression, interest, requests for help, questions, observation, trust, or attempts to understand the loving person's true motive. Yet he loves and endures everything. It is very difficult to believe that someone loves you. You have already experienced so much betrayal and disappointment in life that you have become accustomed to closing yourself off from everyone. Even when you allow someone into your life, you do so only under certain conditions. But this person loves without any conditions and does so continually. What if it is true? It is almost frightening to imagine. It would mean that I have forever become someone very precious and close to this person. It means that throughout his life, he will look for strengths and positive qualities in me and admire them. It means that he will never become a traitor and will never harm me. Yet in all this, he lives humbly, waiting for my decision and

joyfully accepting everything I do and decide. He knows how to wait and can do so for an entire lifetime. Unfortunately, sometimes we truly appreciate the love of such a person only after his death. Life is so short and fleeting. How deeply we long to recover its moments, but it is no longer possible.

How I long to become a child so that I can simply receive my friend’s love and enjoy it. But life experience and a corrupted, closed heart greatly interfere with this.

Rejoice if you have such a person, such a friend, in your life. His worth exceeds all the riches of this world. His presence brings peace and rest, joy and blessing to everything. With him, you can make many plans and accomplish much.

It is so wonderful when someone appears in your life who loves you with agape love. It is especially joyful when you notice and receive it. Such people bring only happiness, love, and friendship into your life. Wherever they are, blessings appear and there is steady spiritual gain with no loss. They are a kind of victor, moving unwaveringly toward the goal and knowing what they are doing. Their confidence inspires you as well.

The question is, where can you find such a person, such a friend? There is an answer: become that person yourself. If you want to have many friends, show yourself friendly. This spirit, like a magnet, will draw the very best things to you. It will also make you more beautiful and interesting.

How wonderful it is when a person appears in your life who simply loves you. You cannot produce this love within him. It is his choice. He must arrive at it himself, make the decision, and become firmly established in it. Despite all your friendliness, you cannot force him to do this. But you can help him by giving him your love and friendship. Therefore, sow love. Whatever you sow, you will also reap.

If you have a friend who loves you, value him and receive his humble offer to love you. This will bring great joy to his heart, and then he will be able to do much good for you. If necessary, he will give you the very best things he possesses within his soul, if only you may be well.

If you do not yet have such a friend, or if you have not yet noticed him, I want to assure you that this is not so. There are earthly friends who may cease to be present or may never have been present. But there are Heavenly friends Who are always present and love you very deeply. The Very Best Friend has already come. He is right beside you, very near—only the closed door of your weary heart separates you from Him. He is waiting only for your decision to open your heart to Him. He will enter, heal you, teach you something very good, answer all your requests, fulfill all your desires, and show you great and hidden things that you do not know. His Name is Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of Man. He has already decided to become your Friend. He is already your Friend, and He will give you many friends.

There is also an entire army of kind Angels who have cared for you and carried you in their arms since childhood. They love you even if you do not believe it, and they await meeting you in Eternity. They are your loving friends forever. There are very many of them. They know you very well, and they are very kind.

If you have a friend in this world who continually tells you or writes to you about his love and friendship, rejoice that you have him. What you do with him is your decision.

There is a proverb: “Water does not flow beneath a stone that lies still.” In my dreams, I can reach the highest peaks and gain the entire world. But the reality is that I must get up, leave my private space, and begin to act.

Looking for friends in the garbage dump of this world is not a very rewarding task. You do not know what will come of it, and perhaps you will be unsuccessful. But God has proven places where dependable people gather. They may not even know that someone is looking for them as friends, but they are waiting for the real you. Within God’s family are very many of your friends who have been missing you for a long time. They are ready for true friendship, but they do not know how such relationships are built and therefore hesitate to take this step.

And now we have met. We are family in Christ but strangers in our relationship because we do not yet know one another. I

take a step of faith and enter your life forever. What will you do with me? That is your choice. It is not so complicated. Yet this approach gives me an advantage: I begin first so that I will never retreat. I know the laws of friendship and live by them. I begin applying them to another person and see their operation and power. They enter your life and change everything. You have nowhere to escape. You are destined for eternal friendship if you desire it and make that decision.

Every relationship involves choice. Even God takes our desires into consideration and does not establish me in something I have not chosen. But He has given a commandment that must go into effect and accomplish God’s will in our lives.

True friendship is the response and agreement of two hearts. We can build upon such a foundation. But what exactly should we build? We decide that. It may consist merely of polite greetings, kind words, friendly conversation, shared activities, common possibilities for growth, or something more. We decide. But perhaps we have not yet met. To do so, we must simply get up, go out, and find one another. Moreover, we have the Lord, Who loves giving us to one another forever. Then you look and marvel: you were not here before, but now you are.

Bible Verses for Reflection

John 15:4; Colossians 2:2–3; 3:10, 12–14; Psalm 91:11; 34:7; Philippians 4:4–7; Ephesians 3:3–20; Revelation 3:21; 2 Corinthians 5:14; 6:11–13; 11:29; 12:15; 13:11–13; Isaiah 60:1–4.

## Agape Friendship

I will reveal a little secret to you that I am now ashamed to admit. At the very beginning of my Christian life, some of my new friends in the faith taught me by their example that a person could have a true understanding of God and faith while remaining an ordinary person with ordinary worldly character traits. I became so accustomed to this that I did not even try to change anything. I believed that after accepting the truth, I simply had to continue living until death and preserve my faith. To do this, I needed to perform good deeds, share my knowledge with other people, and continue learning from books. In my relationships with others, we were to love one another within our established boundaries, smiling pleasantly and speaking in quiet, calm voices.

When Eternity arrived, the happy life described so often in books would finally begin. New faithful friends would appear, the fullness of love would descend upon me, and we would hold hands, rejoice in our salvation, and obey God's commandment to love one another. I would begin thinking about the happiness of others, and they would respond to me in the same way. We would never sin, and all quarrels would cease. Every disputed matter would be settled immediately and fade away in a spirit of friendship. But for now, I needed to withdraw into the land of "Me, Myself, and I" and strive with all my heart to remain faithful to the principles we had discovered, building the foundation of my faith upon a solid foundation. I lived this way for many years, unaware that anything could be changed in this familiar cycle of activities and discoveries.

I had always believed that Eternal life begins at the Second Coming of Christ. I was very surprised when I was shown in the Bible that it had already begun when I believed in Jesus and received Him as my Savior.

Then many questions arose. If I am already living eternally, why should I wait until the Second Coming to change something? I should begin living by the laws of Eternity now and treat others as I will treat them there. I began trying it, and it worked. It

turns out that we can love unconditionally here as well. We can find friends and rejoice in their salvation and presence right now, today. We can pay for every service with love, and that works too. How fascinating!

I also made another discovery. There is agape love, and there is agape friendship. We have already written a little about love, but agape friendship is something new. I will say at once that this exact expression does not appear in the Bible. Yet the principle and meaning of such a relationship are visible to those who seek and love.

Love does not stand still. It longs for new discoveries and explores every possibility, seeking to understand how to make another person's life better and friendship more joyful. When love is present in the heart and is given at the first request and whenever it is needed, it becomes very easy to love where love was once impossible and to love those toward whom I had been indifferent. Friendship with people who are especially dear to me moves toward a deeper understanding of the unconditional nature of these relationships. Only agape love is capable of this kind of friendship. Jesus gives us an eternal example of how He loves His friends. Why should I act differently? It is God's love that brings clarity to the question of friendship.

The touch of agape love makes my friendship unconditional. It is impossible to show unconditional love while at the same time making it clear that I will be your friend only if you behave as I expect. Love sees everything, yet believes all things and endures all things. I believe that unconditional love is possible. I believe that unconditional mutual friendship exists.

Of course, one condition greatly helps keep friendship on the right course. It is good when this love is mutual within the relationship and when my friend understands that he is loved unconditionally. It is good when he responds in the same way.

According to the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:46, loving those who love you is a useless exercise if you do not also have love for your enemies and those who mistreat you. The distinctive quality of agape love is that it treats everyone in the same way.

If you see its genuine expression toward an enemy, you know that it will also be genuine toward a friend.

Why did Jesus not give the commandment to love one another to the entire multitude during the Sermon on the Mount, but instead speak it at the very end, shortly before His death? Through His life, the Savior demonstrated an example of such love. Then He asked His disciples to show the same attitude toward one another. This was necessary. They could not attain it without power from above.

If I suddenly decide to love my enemy without understanding what love is or where it comes from, how long will I continue loving him? It will last only a very short time.

Once I heard the story of a believer who decided to love someone. But when his enemy began behaving with complete insolence, this believer became an unbeliever for five minutes, immediately settled every misunderstanding, and then turned back into a believer. The matter was resolved, and the enemy became quiet in his hatred. I was bewildered. Love does not behave this way. It does not use Satan’s services to achieve its purposes. Love is ready to die while remaining faithful to its principles.

I cannot imagine responding to people of the flesh according to their own nature. It would be like placing a wolf’s skin upon a sheep and sending it in that disguise into a pack of wolves. They would immediately recognize a stranger among them and take action.

When Christ was being led to trial, two disciples followed Him: John and Peter. John did not hide the fact that he was a disciple of Christ and kept away from the mob. He had no trouble with anyone. Peter, however, decided to blend into the crowd and remain unnoticed. It did not work, and he denied the Lord three times. I experienced something similar when I tried to love without possessing this gift. I wanted to prove to Jesus that I could produce something in this direction within myself. But He waited sadly for me to begin asking for something greater so that I would allow Him to love within me.

It is impossible to love eternally and unconditionally without the personal presence of Christ in the heart. It is likewise impossible to have unconditional friendship without possessing unconditional love. We can give our relationships this name without even understanding their essence and add that they are Christian. But Christianity begins where Christ reigns in the heart. Understanding this, I give Him that authority.

Friendship should be agape, but I cannot accomplish this by my own strength. I write about it to show that some goals are very high yet still attainable. When I understand what is expected of me and what I must do, I begin living accordingly. Jesus blesses me along this path as I learn to use and correctly understand His gifts.

It is so fascinating to have agape friendship within my heart. But for it to be practiced mutually, someone else must also be taught agape love so that the relationship does not remain one-sided and unbalanced.

Will we have agape friendship in Eternity? Yes. It cannot be otherwise, because there will be no conditions there. Has Eternal life already begun for you? If so, these laws of Eternity are already operating in your life, and they should be obeyed.

To look athletic, you can put on athletic clothing, and everyone will see an athlete in you.

I once considered myself a believer, and so that everyone could see it, I made myself a small gold cross and wore it continually. People respected me for it and regarded me as one of their own.

But friendship has no special clothing and no little crosses of friendship. It does, however, have Christ’s white raiment, which He counsels us to buy, put on, and wear. And we are to wear it now.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Romans 2:20–21, 29; Revelation 16:15; 3:18, 20; Hebrews 12:3–4; Colossians 2:9–10; Romans 6:13–14; 5:5, 10; Ephesians 2:4–6; Matthew 5:44–48; Luke 22:34; 14:27; John 15:8.

## The Purpose of Friendship

I simply love, and this is a simple, ordinary state of mind and way of thinking for me.

No one will ever be able to see with his eyes or comprehend with his mind what I am writing about. It can be felt only by the heart when one soul comes into direct contact with another. From the outside, everything looks ordinary, without form or majesty.

But God knows what He has given me and watches very attentively to see how I use this Heavenly treasure and how much of it I invest in one undertaking or another. He greatly desires to be exalted in my life. I understand this and ask for wisdom to know how best to accomplish it.

God’s dream for me is to reveal His love to me and to see His reflection—His character—in me.

Will I bring joy to my Creator? I deeply desire to do so.

Do you know the greatest sorrow of someone who loves? It is the absence of an open heart into which he can enter and give all the blessings of Heaven in the form of love, happiness, and friendship. It is so sad to remain alone with all these Heavenly treasures—unneeded, unwanted, and lonely among friends, brothers, and sisters.

But Jesus comforts you by reminding you that He also experienced all of this and understands both your struggle and your joys.

At times, you deeply desire someone to be near who will receive your love and friendship with joy and great eagerness, long for them, inspire you to greater love, thank God for you, and respond in the same way. Although love does not seek its own interests, it greatly values such people and longs to have them so that it can give itself freely and from a pure heart. The good news is that everyone will be like this in Eternity, but we must learn it here.

It is so wonderful when you love a friend, observe him, sense his spirit, read his thoughts, and see the expression on his face and the emotions produced by your influence. You immerse yourself completely in friendship and open your heart to give it to another person. You watch how you are received, how your love is valued and accepted, and how the soul of someone close to you opens to let you enter and never releases you. You see this and are in no hurry to leave. Indeed, you have no intention of leaving. Why would you? Sincerity, kindness, tenderness, peace, and indescribable joy overflow the heart. Although you are simply talking about ordinary things, soul joins with soul and heart with heart. The Spirit of God reveals to you the most beautiful things that can be found in your friend. You attend to these discoveries and quietly rejoice in the beautiful moments of the fellowship of love.

If you have such a friend, value him, protect him, and love him with all your heart. He will always bring you joy through his presence, a kind word, or a helpful deed, even if he is very far away.

Love has no borders. It is not limited by time, nationality, sex, or age. It looks for opportunities to give itself—to give itself forever—so that the next time it may give even more. Love remembers very well every place and heart where it has been received. It loves returning there to give itself once again and make that place even more beautiful.

Will you say that such a thing does not exist in this world? You are mistaken. It does. Consider little children, their sincere embraces, simple and pure words, complete trust, and acceptance of you as their friend.

This can also be found among adults, though less often. Everyone has been hurt before and does not want to experience pain again. Yet your sincere love opens the soul.

I have described the desires of love in human terms. Perhaps each of you shares the dream of being needed by someone, or even by a particular person with whom you live in the same home. But reality is not so romantic, and sometimes all you can

do is dream. At times, people are ready to destroy you simply because you are kind to others.

Now imagine how the One Who is Love dreams about each of us. What is His dream for every person? With what attention He watches every process within my heart—my response and my behavior. How deeply He longs to give Himself to me! My acceptance of His love inspires Him so greatly that He is even ready to seat me beside Himself upon His throne so that we will never be separated again.

Jesus loves you, my friend. These true words contain the very best truth about you. Christ's greatest dream is to be needed by you, received by you, and valued by your entire being.

The loneliest place for love is among people close to you who have no need of you. At times, they need your strength, money, knowledge, experience, or help, while you yourself, as a loving friend, are unwanted.

Perhaps the place of greatest loneliness for Christ on Earth is the Church. People come there to sing songs about Him, preach a sermon, or ask Him for something, yet they keep Jesus Himself at a distance behind the closed door of their hearts and make it clear through all their behavior that they do not need Him.

But love does not grow faint. It seeks a way to pour itself out. Who will receive it?

If you have a friend who joyfully receives you and makes it unmistakably clear that you are precious to him, needed by him, and welcome at any time, rejoice that you have such a friend.

When you receive into your heart a person who loves you, you accomplish two very important things. First, you inspire him toward greater love, greater changes, greater discoveries, and greater joy. You make him needed by you. Second, you yourself become loving toward others. Irreversible processes take place in your mind, and you begin discovering the laws of love, which are as eternal as God. Together with the person who loves you,

you welcome into your life the One Who is Love. Whoever dwells in love dwells in God. Loving one another is such a beautiful state, and everyone who abides in it benefits. There is no sin in love. It is pure and perfect. It is the foundation of holiness and true wisdom. Whoever finds love, tastes its true essence and depth, and learns the laws of its existence gains an eternal and genuine treasure for the soul and is destined for eternal happiness, peace, and joy in the Lord.

I decided to love, and I am ready to follow this path until the final victory. Sometimes it takes years to win a person’s heart, while others surrender without a battle.

It is fascinating to live in a state of constant readiness because you think only about whom you can love, how you can bring joy to someone’s heart, and whom you can help. Love gives you commands that you carry out. It opens new possibilities before you and teaches you many good things. And it never ends. Love has a Divine nature, yet it is considered human because it operates among us. Without considering its nature, we regard it as our own possession and creation. But love comes from Heaven to bless what is earthly. It comes to remain forever and give us a portion of Eternity.

To accomplish this plan more effectively, Love takes its own sister, Friendship, as an ally. Together they seek a person whom they can teach so that through him they may pour themselves into this world, bringing love, friendship, and happiness. And this purpose will be accomplished.

Bible Verses for Reflection

James 1:25, 16–17; 2:12; 2 Peter 1:3–8; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 4:16, 21; 3:16; Ephesians 3:9–10; 4:13, 15; John 17:21–23; Zephaniah 2:3; Hebrews 13:1.

## Who Is My Friend to Me?

If I decide to master a particular field of knowledge, what must I do? For example, suppose I decide to become a doctor. I go out, buy an anatomy textbook, read it, try to memorize some terms, and carefully examine the pictures. Now I am already an expert—or at least this is better than nothing. I can consider myself a doctor. To become a professor of medicine, I need only read a couple more books about the structure of certain organs, memorize all the definitions, and then I can teach others. Practical experience will eventually show me what is located where in the human body. And thanks to YouTube, I can also see everything in real life, start my own channel, and share my knowledge with others.

In this way, anything useful and necessary can be learned, as long as there is a desire.

I think this approach brought a smile to your face. In one word: an amateur.

But when I approach the field of love and friendship with the same attitude, for some reason I begin considering myself someone special and my knowledge in this area to be advanced mathematics. I enjoy hearing people call me a teacher, but I assume the appearance of a humble person and ask them not to call me that, while inwardly agreeing that this is exactly what I am. Yet if all my knowledge is considered, in God’s eyes I look like a three-year-old child who has managed to learn a few things but imagines that he knows everything. Of course, such behavior in children does not irritate their parents. Instead, it brings a tender smile to their faces because they know how far their children still have to grow. The parents gently lift their children into their arms, assure them of their love, and tell them that they are the very best.

Of course, the conditions under which we learn differ from a child’s growth. We are in a real war in which souls are perishing all around us, and our lives are in constant mortal danger. But thanks to God’s protection and the continual

ministry of Angels, we are still alive and have peace in our hearts.

When I gain a friend, what do I desire to discover in him? Who is my friend to me? If this is the person with whom I intend to create a family, what should I know about him? It is very important to understand who my friend or life companion truly is because my attitude toward that person depends upon it.

Consider the example of a family. If I am attracted only to my wife's body, then once it belongs to me, it will please my flesh and bring enjoyment to my senses, and this attitude will dominate. In return for this gift, I will earn money to invest in the source of my sensual pleasure, decorating it with clothing, cosmetics, and garlands. But this is a human being, not a Christmas tree. This body also has a soul that needs to be discovered and longs to be valued. To study that soul, I must change my priorities.

If I decide to discover a master chef in my wife as well, my knowledge in this area will increase noticeably. I will marvel at the wonders of her cooking and praise her for this work. But eventually, I will understand that the cook has a soul that languishes with the desire to be discovered and understood. I decide to know her as the mother of our children. Oh, how many new things await me, and how much happiness these little people bring into the home! But they also have souls that long to be explored and personally known. Meanwhile, my wife has grown weary in the routines of daily life as a body, a cook, and a caregiver. Her heart longs for something more. It desires to open, but it can do so only in response to my request and interest. If I have stopped growing in this knowledge, family conflicts and criticism begin. All the unused inner potential is spent on resolving family problems. Against this background, my wife's body is aging, while so many beautiful, smiling bodies appear all around me that the temptation to choose one of them becomes very strong.

I choose faithfulness and decide to discover the creative person within my wife. How many new things I have learned about her! And this is only the beginning. I begin wondering who stands

before me. Is she a woman, a mother, a cook, a database, a decorated house, a city with its own attractions, or an entire planet longing for new discoveries? Who is this friend of mine to me? And who am I to my wife? Am I a body, a taxi driver, an ATM, a mover, or a handyman? I also have a soul that longs to open. The limitless potential of an entire planet that remains to be explored has also been placed within me. Yet I do not even know who I am. I serve as a floor mat upon which feet are wiped and as a means of life support. Life passes, and we race through it. As we lose one another along the way, we begin to understand how little we came to know each other and how little we allowed ourselves to be known.

If I have gained a friend, who is he to me? How should I perceive him? My interest in him will develop within the boundaries of communication that I establish for him and for myself. Yet it is possible to go further.

To help me answer all these difficult questions, I am offered love. Love knows how to open the surface of a person’s soul and find the valuable minerals and inexhaustible resources hidden in the depths of the heart. I discover a new microcosmic world of my friend’s possibilities and marvel at the discoveries within his personality. I am captivated by this world of boundless possibilities and by the way love finds new and fascinating treasures of the soul and presents them in their true light.

God created us for one another as undiscovered planets so that through love for one another, we may rejoice in new discoveries and achievements. Love makes all of this real and beautiful. Only Eternity will be able to contain the fullness of our endless revelations about one another. After many, many millions of years, I may be able to say about one of my friends that I know him even as I am known. Yet all these revelations will resemble playing in a sandbox compared with the true knowledge of God. Throughout endless Eternity, He will reveal Himself to us in the fullness of His love and beauty, unveiling the remarkable mysteries of His Soul, which I have already begun to know by faith while living on a sinful Earth in a mortal body.

All of this has been placed within each of us. At times, without realizing it, we look for someone who will begin uncovering it, drawing it out, and admiring what he discovers. Even if someone finds only a little house with decorative flourishes within me, I still rejoice that in at least this form, I have become interesting to someone. The prospect of being a taxi driver and an ATM for life does not bring much joy to the soul.

But who will discover a planet within me? I know that there is such a Friend. His Name is Jesus. I come to Him and open my soul wide before Him so that I may be known. He explores my heart with interest and amazes me with what He finds. I had never imagined that I could possess such potential for different abilities and useful qualities.

Yet undiscovered planets also surround me everywhere, concealing so many fascinating things within themselves. Only my love can find and uncover them. How wonderfully we have been created! What a beautiful commandment of love has been given to us! We can find new galaxies and explore one another endlessly without ever reaching the fullness of knowledge and discovery. Yes, we certainly cannot do without Eternity here! Eternity is worth entering and living in.

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, the holy Angels, my holy friends, and I form a very good team for eternal discoveries and achievements.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Jeremiah 33:3; 32:27, 39–40; 15:19; Proverbs 11:25; 2:4–5; 1 John 3:1–3; Psalm 139:23; 1 Corinthians 13:12; Romans 15:14; James 1:22.

## Destined to Have Many Friends

Once I said that you can never have too many friends, giving the words my own meaning. Later, I saw that the statement could be understood in two ways. I meant that no matter how many friends you have, the number is never too great. But some people understood my words differently. They decided that a person should have only a few friends.

Let us imagine the following situation. You ask the Lord for the gift of agape love. He answers and gives it to you, beginning to teach you how to use this power. As a result, you grow in favor with God and people and exert an influence upon those around you. They are not blind. They see in you an answer to their expectations and begin drawing near to you. They understand that you are genuine and that your love for them is pure. They see that they are destined to receive your constant kindness. This irritates some people, while it draws others to you. Without even noticing it, you gain lifelong friends by investing your finest feelings and deeds in them. They tell others about you and draw toward you more people who are tired of lies and conditions. These souls become attached to you with all their hearts.

Wherever you go, God’s love within you goes with you, and it is impossible to hide. It will reveal you from your very first word. If someone’s heart is tuned to the same frequency, it will immediately respond to such an attitude. At some point, you realize that you have gained very many friends who like you and also want to be your friends. Some of them begin loving you in return, sincerely and from a pure heart.

A process of reevaluation begins. You are friendly, and this magnet draws all kinds of people toward you. You do not object to such company. You rejoice that because you possess God’s love, you can speak correctly about God’s will for this world. Yet the number of friends continues to grow. They do not leave you; they simply wait until you have time for them as well. But some understand that friendship is an ongoing personal relationship and expect precisely this approach from you. What

should you do? You cannot stop, and the farther you go, the more friends you gain. Eternity then becomes the solution to this problem. You understand that there, you will be able to devote an unimaginable number of years to every friend, discovering a planet within him and allowing him to discover you.

But what should you do with those who have become attached to you with all their hearts here? I think you should continue loving them and tenderly preserve them in your heart as friends. They are greatly needed. You can always share your happiness, love, and friendliness with them when these things overflow within you and you urgently need someone to help relieve your heart of this burden. Friends receive very well whatever fills your soul. In reality, love can become so abundant that you simply want to give it away to everyone who responds. Strangers may not accept it, but friends will gladly receive it. Giving away what overflows within you is a serious problem for a loving person. Many friends have only small vessels in their hearts that can receive a little, while you pour a cold shower over them. They seem glad, yet they are bewildered by such an abundance of blessings and want to hide somewhere and recover.

Meanwhile, the magnet of your friendliness continues to operate, drawing out of every hiding place those who respond to it.

We are given the remarkable power of love, and its possibilities are immense. Imagine a tsunami wave as tall as a twenty-story building rapidly approaching you. Love is far greater in its destructive power and influence. It destroys every empty stereotype and false idea about itself. It removes bad moods, washes away sorrow and loneliness, utterly destroys sin, produces an immense restoration of the mind, and shapes the human will. Love deals mercilessly with all its enemies, destroying them and driving them away forever.

Do you need such a life? Imagine constant joy, the smiles of friends, words of love and encouragement, happiness that does not disappear even when your pockets and stomach are empty,

inspiration from new victories, and the discovery of new horizons. All of this, watered with love, brings peace to the heart. Can you live with this? Do you need such a life?

The greatest problem is finding someone to make happy when you are bursting with the desire to do so. How strongly these people resist and refuse to believe that you will succeed. Yet you do succeed.

Once I understood that friendship exists and operates together with love, I took this understanding with me to a camp meeting and decided to share it with everyone. I offered my friendship to everyone I met and spoke with. My heart rejoiced over this experience. Later, we all went home. Some time passed. One day, I called my friends, and they told me that other friends who were visiting them sent me their greetings. I asked for their names and could not understand where I had become friends with them. They reminded me of that camp meeting and told me how I had met them, offered myself to them as a friend, and received their response. I felt so ashamed. I simply could not remember them. I do not object to friendship with people, but I should remember those to whom I offer it. At that time, however, I desired this experience so greatly that I had no idea what a foolish situation I would enter. I learned something. Now I try to remember everyone to whom I offer something, and I ask God to bless my decisions about friendship. But over time, I gained so many friends that I decided to be a friend to all people, especially to those of my own faith, so that I would treat everyone in this way.

I also plan in Eternity to become a friend to all the redeemed who will be taken from Earth to Heaven and to all God’s Angels. I want to know each one personally and have a very close relationship with everyone. I believe Eternity will make this goal possible. I believe we will be given special abilities there to carry out these plans.

I understand that since we are all one family, brothers and sisters, the best relationships among us are love and friendship in obedience to God and faith in Jesus—relationships that bring happiness. If these are absent, then something is wrong with

our Christianity. If I receive this truth and choose such an approach in love, who can prevent me from living this way?

Whoever desires to have many friends must also show himself friendly. And it works. But this is not merely my decision; it is a gift from Heaven. It is impossible to act this way while possessing an evil heart filled with sin and deceit.

God desires to be glorified in my life, including through my friendliness. He works through this gift, saving friends from many harmful things.

When you have many friends, how can you communicate with them all? They are like stars: you cannot always see them, but they are present. Love solves this problem as well. As the years pass, such relationships do not disappear but remain just as joyful and friendly. I am open to everyone. Of course, if they all came at the same moment, it would be very difficult to receive them at once, but the Lord has settled this matter too. Do not be afraid to become my friend. It is a good undertaking, although it lasts for life. And it is so joyful!

All of this is possible only in Jesus. He is the One Who joins our hearts and relationships through His love. Without Him, there is emptiness, darkness, and death. But I choose life, happiness, love, and friendship. May the Lord bless me in this choice. His blessing makes rich and adds no sorrow with it.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Proverbs 18:24; Colossians 3:15; 2 Timothy 3:2; 1 Peter 3:8; Revelation 21:1–3; Leviticus 19:17–18.

## God’s Presence in Friendship and Love

If I regard the expression of my love as a human undertaking, I will perceive it in human terms and will not expect any significant discoveries or revelations. It will be enough for me to learn what psychology textbooks say about it and compare that information with my own situation.

But the love we study in our school has a Divine nature. It contains a prophetic prediction that God’s people must possess it. This love is embodied in the Lord’s commandment given before Christ’s death. Since it is so important in these last days, God must have a plan to awaken special interest among those who long for revival and transformation. Today, every prediction of God concerning the last days arouses genuine interest throughout the world, especially if it involves destruction or disease. The message of love will also attract attention. But its purpose is not merely to predict that love must exist. Its purpose is to bring a deep change to the thinking of God’s people, who have tasted the influence of the world and its intoxicating wine and are seeking ways to free the mind from the power of sin and reveal the true beauty of God’s character through the unconditional love of God’s children for one another. This love will lead us into mutual, reciprocal, unconditional friendship. Such a phenomenon will not be a chance coincidence but the conscious, purposeful action of the souls and wills of those who receive this message and put it into practice in their lives.

In the message to Laodicea, Jesus states very clearly what I need to buy. In the parable of the ten virgins, He reveals the desperation and hopeless condition of those who came too late to the ones selling these Heavenly goods.

Every field of knowledge is good and beneficial. But when separated from love, it is useful only for a short time and only here, in this perishing world.

The study of love begins now with learning its laws and will never end throughout Eternity. We have begun something

extremely important, valuable, enduring, solidly founded, unshakable, beautiful, and magnificent. We cannot even imagine where this love will lead us or how remarkable the discoveries God has prepared within this learning process will be. If we could catch even a single glimpse of where this knowledge and study will lead, I believe our attitude toward this message would change radically.

Through love and the study of this field of knowledge, my heart comes into contact with God Himself, the Creator of the universe. He condescends so far that He allows Himself to be known directly, allows us to touch His Soul, and permits us to look within. The blood of Christ made such a path possible.

I do not know how believers lived before the Laodicean period. Apparently, they possessed a knowledge of love in the measure they needed. But in our time, it is vitally important because the Lord Himself offers it. And if He offers something, He also blesses it.

I know with certainty that each of you has felt or realized that through the lessons of our school, something unusual begins happening in the heart, something changes in the mind, and something new is revealed. If I regard this undertaking as something merely human—as nothing more than the interesting experiences of a strange brother—I should look more deeply. The very name agape tells us that this love is a plant of Heavenly origin. Describing and understanding something Heavenly requires inspiration from above, and that inspiration is given.

I simply cannot possess agape without God. They form one complete and indivisible reality. The character of Christ is contained within this gift from Heaven. The issue is not the name but the nature of love. When I decide to possess agape love and tell God of my decision, I am essentially asking Him to love with this love within me, revealing His Divine nature through my human nature. The friendliness produced by this love also bears God’s seal and has a nature of Heavenly origin because it is born of Eternal love.

When I decide to love, I give God authority to work within me through this love, even though I may regard it as something of my own, something human. But I have an exceedingly powerful enemy whom I cannot see, and what is human within me will not be sufficient to resist him. He is stronger than I am in every respect, both spiritually and physically. But God intervenes on my behalf and fights within me, and the enemy is powerless to resist Him.

I live in a country where animals and insects are protected by the government. If I suddenly decide to use my strength openly to destroy these creatures, the entire legal and executive system of the country will intervene on their behalf. It possesses sufficient means to oppose my plans. Knowing this, I do not enter into conflict but try to live in such a way that no complaint can be made against me. For example, if I decide to demolish an old house in which a bat lives and the environmental protection authorities learn about it, they will forbid me to proceed while the bat remains there. Specially trained people will visit and check whether I am harming the animal. That little bat has more rights to my house than I do, though it does not even know it. But someone has enacted laws for its protection, placed it on a protected-species list, and watches to ensure that it is safe in this country. A single nestling can stop any construction project if human activity threatens its life, because the entire legislative system will rise to protect it.

In the same way, the enemy of souls knows that I am under God’s special protection and cannot act openly against me. Therefore, he secretly tries to lure me into the territory under his authority, destroy my soul there, and through me affect other people as well.

Love protects me from every direction. When I decide to be a friend to another person and treat him this way throughout my life, God’s invisible blessing rests upon this choice. A strong bond is established between us, joining our hearts into one. Even if we communicate very little, this bond preserves us in love for one another. In this way, we always love each other

mutually and are ready to live with this continually. It is a blessing when such a mutual relationship is established within the family. It is a small portion of Heaven in my home. Unfortunately, not every family reaches this point. Some instead become testing grounds for new forms of destruction and defense.

Friendship is a product manufactured in Heaven. I cannot understand or explain everything involved in this decision, but I see how God preserves me from evil through it. At times, a friend has betrayed me or behaved very badly toward me. I wanted simply to break off everything and forget him, but the Lord gently reminded me of my decision to be his friend, as though saying, “What will you gain through such an approach? This is how the world acts.” I decide to preserve this attitude and remain a friend, even though it can be very painful. The essence of victory is to pass through the pain while preserving love and friendship forever. The form of the relationship may change, but the relationship itself does not end. If a friend forbids me to enter his home, I will not violate that prohibition, but I will continue loving him within the boundaries that remain.

Being a friend is a Heavenly field of knowledge worth mastering. And God will teach us this art.

Bible Verses for Reflection

2 Corinthians 6:16; Matthew 28:18–20; John 17:10–11, 21, 26; 15:13.

## The Inexplicable Qualities of Friendship

The more deeply you explore the concept of friendship and try to describe it in words, the more you realize that it is a great mystery of the soul that cannot always be expressed in this way.

This bond between you and your friend is invisible to the eye, yet it joins your hearts with strong threads of love and heartfelt affection.

We are accustomed to children being born into the world. We have studied this process, and someone has even managed to record the development of an embryo within its mother's womb. The entire sequence of a child's prenatal development has been charted day by day, and special smartphone apps have been created to display the process. Yet no one can explain why a person develops in precisely this way. It is also remarkable that this person simply did not exist anywhere before. You did not know that he would ever appear, and you could not imagine how your life would change when he was born. Then he appeared, and the world became different. Now all your activities are planned around the fact that this person is present in your life. He is a part of you, your heart is with him, and there is no escaping it. You are attached to him. This bond changes its form through the years, but it does not end. These invisible threads of love bind your heart forever to a little person who previously had never been present in your life or even in your plans. You do not know what he will become or how your future relationship will develop, but you decide to love and care for this human being. No matter how difficult it may be, this child is yours forever.

My friends were not part of my plans. When I asked God for love, I did not even suspect that together with it, He would also give me you, my friends. You were not in my life. I did not know you or plan to have you. I did not even know what agape friendship was or that it existed. But the Lord began giving you to me, and you began appearing in my life and shining like stars. At first, I found it interesting and did not understand what was happening or why my heart was becoming attached to

you. Then I decided that these relationships should be permanent and never end, and I began praying that God would bless us in this. Many of you do not even know that my life is bound to yours by the strongest bonds of love and friendship. But I made this decision and asked for God’s blessing and approval, and He answered. How can this be seen? Through deeds? Through words? It is much deeper, and I do not know how to explain it. Perhaps these are merely problems within my heart. Perhaps this should not be happening. Perhaps I invented it myself and am simply rejoicing over my own imagination. Yet I read the Bible, study the life of Jesus, and see that my love for my friends does not contradict God’s will. Indeed, this is exactly what it should be like. Moreover, it should be mutual. I begin speaking about it, but in response, I hear ridicule, unbelief, and misunderstanding. Then I must carry everything within myself and share it only with Jesus. I often ask Him in prayer to keep this heartfelt affection pure and right, having nothing in common with sin. And the Lord listens and answers.

Now I have dared to tell you about this. Yet I understand that there are no words capable of explaining the joy of realizing that you exist, that you have appeared in my life forever, that a part of my heart is with you, and that this is from God. What you decide to do with me is your own choice.

I know that this is not the end but the beginning of new acquaintances and bonds that will never end. They will be taken into Eternity so that these relationships may continue there as well.

The only thing that can destroy this bond is my sin, which the enemy of souls persistently offers me. But I do not want to live in sin. I flee from it, refusing to dwell in it. God sees this desire within me and preserves me from evil.

I also rejoice that many of you are not yet present in my life or even in my plans. But you are present in God’s plans for me. When He gives you to me, you will appear in my life, take a place in my heart forever, and bring me joy throughout my life simply because you exist.

Why am I writing this? I am simply sharing with you what takes place within a loving heart so that when you notice the same thing within yourself, you will not be afraid. Instead, you will remember me and receive it as a gift from the Lord.

No one is forcing me to speak about this, and my confession places no obligation upon anyone. There is no reason to pretend that something exists when it does not. I am simply sharing this in a lesson about love, trying to convey that within the human heart and within friendship are inexplicable things for which the necessary words simply do not exist. Yet they can be experienced.

Sometimes you wonder what will happen with a person if you openly and directly tell him about your love for him—within the boundaries of love and faithfulness toward your family, of course. How will he understand you? Will he hear you? Will he respond in the same way? Yet this commandment has been given to both of us and to all believers. I first try to express this carefully through words or hints. If I do not encounter a wall, I continue. But if I see misunderstanding or rejection, I accept it, step back, and begin to wait. I may wait a long time, perhaps for the rest of my life.

If I am received, I very gently explore how I should continue being a friend so that I may become established in this relationship and retain this status throughout my life.

Are there people with whom friendship is impossible and with whom we should not even begin establishing such a bond? Unfortunately, yes. The next chapter will address this.

Love has its own special language, which my heart understands perfectly and knows how to speak. Sometimes there are no words, yet the bond has been established. Another inexplicable quality of friendship is that God’s Spirit takes an active part in this event, adorning such relationships and making them right and perfect. At times, neither you nor your friend has said or done anything special, yet both of you are happy. There is no visible reason for it, but you are both delighted with each other,

and there is no explanation. This is how it should be, and it is right.

But the enemy of souls desires to pervert everything. One person speaking with impure lips and presenting this relationship in a false light is enough to make the red warning light come on. Boundaries, walls, and fences are then erected so that this person will not continue thinking and speaking in that way. How often the envy, lies, and evil words of people close to us quickly destroy something that took years to build. This also happens in friendship. Every relationship passes through the fire of trial and reveals how strong and genuine it is.

But love boldly enters the fire. It is not afraid of further purification because it is already pure, and for me, love itself is the fire. It is love that reveals all my sins and the weaknesses of my soul.

Just as I cannot understand how a child develops within its mother, so in friendship, it is sometimes difficult to explain how this person entered my life forever and why his presence brings such joy to my heart, as though he were created to be my friend. This heartfelt affection joins us so firmly that afterward nothing can separate us if, from the beginning, we have allowed God to make us friends.

Can you imagine how the heart of Jesus becomes attached to us —to those whom He loves so deeply, calls, and awaits? How tenderly He protects these relationships while remaining faithful, tactful, and pure. He gives me an example of true friendship. The closer I come to Him, the more I marvel at what a wonderful Friend He is and what a marvelous Lord He is. He is not only my Savior but also the One Who loves me deeply.

Bible Verses for Reflection

1 John 4:7, 11; Proverbs 17:17; John 17:15–16; Ecclesiastes 5:4; Song of Solomon 8:7.

## Misunderstanding One Another

We human beings have been given the gift of communication, and it distinguishes us from the rest of the animal world. We possess will, reason, and intellect. These higher powers of the soul are capable of directing our actions. We are able to think and choose.

Through speech, I can express aloud everything that is in my heart—what I know and what I understand.

After the Flood, God divided humanity by languages. All people were the children of one father, Noah. But when they united to build the tower of Babel, they demonstrated their distrust of God. He had to intervene, causing each person to cease understanding the others. Humanity was completely divided into nations according to language.

As long as you live within a culture where everyone speaks the same language, you have no difficulty communicating. But when a foreigner appears who does not understand you, and you see that you have no point of connection with him, it becomes very difficult to understand what he wants. In this situation, an interpreter is needed. Is friendship with such a person possible? In theory, yes. He understands every language of love except your native tongue and will gladly receive any help from you. But because you cannot communicate, you will have no emotional contact or bond. I am always amazed by people who create families upon such a foundation. Eventually, however, one spouse learns the other's language, and they are able to communicate.

Fellow believers from Romania began coming to our church. I observed how united they were with one another and decided to become a friend to one of them. I greatly desired to experience a relationship with people who spoke another language. As a result of my efforts, they began smiling warmly at me as a kind acquaintance, but that was as far as it went. I understood that they were not interested in me as a friend because I could not express my thoughts and feelings in their

language, and they did not know mine. Even those who had learned a little German could not freely express their thoughts or have friendly conversation in that language. I am not stating categorically that friendship with people whom you cannot understand is impossible. Yet there are definite difficulties that separate us. At the same time, I noticed that spiritually—in our understanding of church teachings, the Bible, and reform—we were in complete unity. My Jesus is also their Savior and communicates perfectly with them in their native language.

There is another kind of difference that hinders full friendship: my spiritual identity. Throughout my life, I have worked with people who do not share my religious convictions. We know one another well, respect each other, rejoice when we meet, find common ground, joke, communicate, and carry out many kinds of work together. What we build looks beautiful and complete. But when we part, we do not feel drawn toward one another. Work united us into one team but did not make us friends. I would not call these people strangers. My heart is attached to them because I know them very well and know details of their lives that perhaps no one else will ever learn. I can visit many of them and enjoy friendly conversation. But Jesus is not between us, and this establishes boundaries beyond which we cannot go. Our communication is limited to this world and its concerns.

Jesus knows how to unite unfamiliar souls so closely that sometimes you have known a person for only a short time, yet he becomes so dear to you—and forever. How can this be explained? Miracles!

To win a person for God, it is desirable first to become his friend. But friendship is an emotional bond for life. You do not know whether this soul will turn to God, yet your heart has already become attached to him. If this person influences you and leads you toward lawlessness, such a friendship can become very dangerous, undesirable, and at times even forbidden. What should you do then? Your heart is already with this person. But love helps resolve this dilemma as well. You simply love him and remain ready to serve and help him at any time, while maintaining contact within the boundaries he has

established and the Word of God recommends. God preserves His obedient children from evil.

What should those do who have two different spirits living within one family? Should they be friends? The family is a separate world with many exceptions to general rules. Very often, one spouse comes to God and begins to believe. At other times, someone in a believing family becomes an unbeliever, and this exerts a special influence upon the relationship. I have both situations in one experience. My wife and I came to God from the world, and we had a daughter who was familiar with the truth from childhood. But after fifteen years, these two people closest to me returned to the world. At that time, I began asking for God's love so that I could somehow endure this trial. Now I understand that their fall contributed to my growth. Two different spirits live under one roof, but love teaches me many good things. How much advice I heard and how much I experienced during those days! My Jesus became so close to me throughout this period, and I am so grateful to the Lord for every difficulty He permitted. If such trials had not been present in my life, perhaps I would not have needed greater love. Without possessing it, I could not have shared it. Then this school would not exist, and... and... and... How grateful I am to God for everything He permits and for the way all these things work together for good.

God taught me not to avoid difficulties and problems but to face and resolve them with His help. I cannot be another person's conscience, but I can be his friend or love him, and no one can forbid me to do so.

Is it possible to be a friend of Satan? A person can make such a decision, but this relationship is fraught with sorrowful consequences. It is better not even to try. Yet it is wise to show respect toward this authority so as not to create additional and unnecessary problems.

Should I be friends with those who serve Satan or this world? The answer depends on how I understand friendship, what I place within this concept, and how close these people are to me. I may decide to be a friend while still maintaining distance

and exercising caution. I do not know how my affection may influence these souls. Perhaps someone will be saved and turn to Jesus. Perhaps after my death, the Lord will draw that person to Himself. We should not burn bridges in our relationships or sever connections. Love knows how to keep these people at a distance while holding them very close to the heart. Friendship may not be possible, but love for these souls must remain, and it must be genuine.

An acquaintance of mine has a friend, and once every six months, he goes to a restaurant with him and gets completely drunk. I asked him why he does this. He replied that in this way, he preserves their relationship and makes it strong and unbreakable. To me, this sounds very strange. Not every worldly idea about friendship corresponds to the truth. True friendship has a solid foundation: the presence of Christ in at least one friend, though preferably in both, and the essential presence of God’s agape love. Of course, true friendship does not contradict biblical principles.

I find it interesting to observe how the world tries to unite people in friendship through common interests, hobbies, and ideas. But then a trial comes, and everything collapses. The world creates new clubs and associations. There is a goal and there is unity, but there is no love or heartfelt affection.

Love, however, possesses everything necessary and joins souls very simply and quickly.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Proverbs 29:27; 22:24–25; 2 Corinthians 6:14–16; Proverbs 13:20; 1 Corinthians 15:33; 13:1–3.

## The Crossroads of Friendship

I remember a time when our entire family went out for a walk, and each person chose a different direction, insisting that everyone go that way and under no circumstances in any other direction. It sounds foolish now, but at the time, it was an enormous problem. In the end, each of us went wherever he wanted, convinced that his own path was best. Afterward, we had no friendly communication for a long time because everyone considered himself right and deeply offended. At that time, I had not yet asked God for love to resolve such problems and acted according to what I considered right. My belief that I was the head of the family and therefore had the authority to decide how everyone should live greatly damaged our family relationships and provoked resistance from those close to me. It is now very painful and shameful to remember. Yet I see that this kind of thinking appears very often in our relationships with people.

Life joins human destinies in friendly relationships, and we gain friends through shared interests, rejoicing that someone thinks as I do. We call this merging of hearts into one whole—driven by one idea and possessing common interests—friendship. During such a relationship, I realize that my friend has become very close to me. He knows a great deal about me and has access to the secrets of my life and soul, and I do not want to lose him. Considering how much we have shared together over the years, I will probably never find another person like him anywhere in life, nor do I need to. This friend satisfies all my emotional needs, and I need no one else.

When I was a teenager, I had two friends with whom I shared many things. But one of them drowned. My mind could not comprehend it. How could it be that he no longer existed? A year later, my other friend was killed in a fight that he himself had started. My friendship died together with these people. I was seventeen years old, did not know God, and had been raised by the streets. I had no idea where to seek comfort. Yet the concept of friendship remained within me.

Afterward, life gave me new interests and acquaintances. I lived according to the laws of this world because I knew no others. All of this shaped my mind, making me unfit for Heaven and perhaps even an enemy of God. Yet Jesus noticed this useless person and began drawing me to Himself. My sins did not deter Him. He simply wanted to show me His love, and He continues doing so to this day. I believed that I had a Friend and responded to Him, but I brought my old ideas about friendship with me into my new life.

In my new spiritual growth, however, I received different laws from the Lord, and I liked them very much. Yet they were extremely difficult to put into practice because God's law without God's love was a heavy burden that I felt obligated to carry. Even so, I liked it because I understood that this path was better than the one I had previously followed. My ideas about many things continued traveling with me, and this trailer filled with worldly knowledge greatly damaged my life.

God gave me new friends in the church, but my former ideas about friendship destroyed these relationships, and I did not understand what was happening. Many brothers and sisters lived according to their own understanding. We walked together in unity until we reached the first crossroads of opinion, where we had to choose the right direction. If our interests did not agree, we parted, and our friendship ended. In the world, it might still have been possible to correct something. But in spiritual life, I believed that yielding to someone meant betraying Christ. I could not do that, and my friends thought the same way. We separated, each taking his own road. In complete agreement, though by different routes, we all moved toward the same goal while trying not to cross paths. Meanwhile, everyone appeared to me to be a stubborn Pharisee. Naturally, I did not consider myself one.

Perhaps I am painting the picture too darkly, and in reality, everything was not so bleak. We still communicated, but the friendship we needed so deeply was absent. Some friends remained despite everything, yet I had no proper understanding of such relationships.

Fortunately, the Lord did not leave me in this condition. He loves me deeply and desires to teach me something better.

How painful it always is when you walk through life with a friend and everything is wonderful, but suddenly you see a fork in the road. You choose the one correct and best path and begin directing your steps toward it because it does not contradict the truth. But your friend confidently chooses the other path. You cannot understand why he is so blind. You want to help him, but he resists. The most ordinary thing is that this crossroads of opinions may be found on my dinner plate, in the way I spend my free time, or in my closet. Yet my pride inflates it into such an enormous problem that taking one step to the side becomes equivalent to renouncing the faith and committing the lowest betrayal of Christ, Who revealed these principles to me. Within the family, it can become even more intense and yet more trivial. If one person believes that a banana must be peeled from the stem while the other cannot tolerate it, conflict becomes unavoidable. As a result, all your foolish relatives are declared guilty, while you are considered a failure in life and the living embodiment of evil. This is a general description of the everyday problems that most often cause disagreement.

Unfortunately, I am not the only person like this. The root of this evil lies within my heart, in my pride. It refuses to allow love to purify my mind, dictates its own rules, and even uses the Bible to confirm me in my ambitions.

But love does not boast. Love drives this evil spirit out of the heart and reveals the best solution to the problem with the least possible loss.

The most brutal war among friends occurs when two lonely egotists meet. A man and a woman fall in love and decide to create a family. Once married, each wants to advance his own ambitions and habits as the common rule for everyone. Their love and friendship disappear somewhere, and they sit amid their shattered plans, weeping over what has befallen them and asking why they deserve such a trial. Before the wedding, every issue was resolved without difficulty, and they yielded and showed consideration toward one another. But the problem is

that infatuation had substituted itself for love. At the first crossroads, it died of fear and was unable to rise again. Yet life must continue, so duty and obligation are called upon to help them proceed.

Friendship without love is a very difficult undertaking and extremely hard to manage. Every crossroads requires incredible effort to overcome, yet for the sake of friendship, a person believes he must sacrifice himself. Will anyone appreciate such a sacrifice? I did this and that for him, and look what he did! But life must continue. I sacrifice myself and wait for someone to appreciate it—at least after my death.

Love resolves everything very quickly. Is there a crossroads ahead? Which way are you going? May I go with you? I want to understand why you chose this path. Perhaps I have overlooked something. My path is not bad either. Could we walk beside each other? Please do not be troubled that I think this way. I simply do not yet know another way and am still learning. Forgive me for acting this way. I am deeply sorry that I caused you so much distress. Could we somehow correct this together?

Love is inventive in finding the best solutions, even when they do not benefit itself. Yet in the end, love wins. It knows how to “peel bananas” from either end and sees the solution to a conflict long before the conflict arrives.

Bible Verses for Reflection

1 Corinthians 3:3; 1 Timothy 6:3–5; 1 Peter 3:8–12; 1 Corinthians 11:18–19; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 Timothy 1:5.

## Laying Down One's Life for Friends

I remember an incident during my military service when I had a conflict with a fellow soldier from one of the Central Asian republics. To settle the dispute by force, he invited one of his friends. When they entered the room where I was sitting with my friend, they first tried to settle matters through discussion. When that failed, they started a fight. If my friend had spoken even one word in my defense, perhaps everything could have been resolved peacefully. But he sat silently, watching everything with indifference. When the fight began, he continued sitting in silence. Perhaps fear had paralyzed him, while I defended myself as best I could. In the end, my two opponents ran away bleeding. I thought everything was over and began putting my torn clothing in order. After some time, a commotion arose in our unit. A crowd of fellow countrymen of the soldiers I had beaten came for me and called me out for a confrontation. My fellow soldiers surrounded me. Among them were comrades in arms, friends, and soldiers on duty in our artillery battery, but not one of them stood up for me. As a result, I was left alone against a group of about ten men. Naturally, it did not end very well for me. But by God's mercy, I remained alive, even though I did not know the Lord at that time. My term of service was nearing its end, and I was preparing to be discharged. I had to spend the remaining time in the infirmary.

My understanding of friends changed radically. I realized that I did not have any.

Before His death, Jesus taught in John 15:13: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." What did He mean?

Throughout history, God's children have been persecuted and put to death. It was not difficult to identify them within any group of people. Peter's sorrowful experience of denial taught many that a person can very quickly deny the Lord by speaking one careless word. When one believer was seized, people tried through persuasion, promises, or torture to learn the names

and locations of others who also believed in Jesus. Faithful friends kept these things secret until death.

But Christ's definition of love for friends applies not only to such events. It also applies in peaceful times when there is freedom. Today, we readily provide government agencies with lists of all our church members upon their first request because we understand that there is nothing frightening about it. Our social media accounts openly display all our friends and fellow believers to the entire world, including those we do not know. Any specialist can quickly determine all my spiritual interests and the distinctive features of my faith. It seems that no one intends to kill anyone. But this will not always remain so.

In our peaceful time, the church suffers great losses. Souls perish. As children grow older, they leave for the world. Those who remain often have hostility and disagreements among themselves, dividing into groups according to their interests. Satan could not imagine a better time.

We are approaching the point when a righteous and holy person will soon become the "odd one out" in the church. His fellow believers will cast him out because of his stubbornness and firmness. Unfortunately, this is already happening, though fortunately, not everywhere. In such a situation, how can a person lay down his life for his friends?

I will say honestly that first I want to find these people, make them true friends, and rejoice in the friendship. I have no desire to die and leave them alone in sorrow. But how else can I demonstrate my great love for them? Perhaps this definition has another meaning as well.

A little earlier, we discussed the fact that our life consists of time. If I spend my time upon my friends and their salvation, I give them a part of my life. If I decide to create a family with a friend of the opposite sex, I give my life to that person, that person gives his or her life to me, and together we belong to and serve one another.

The money we earn by applying our hands and minds to labor also contains part of our lives. To obtain it, we devote much

time to our work. Then, in the form of the money received, we give this time to friends and relieve their needs. My money contains part of my life—that is, part of my soul. It is not merely paper but something that cost me a portion of my life.

At times, I have experienced the following. During a gathering, opponents attacked me, wanting to humiliate me or demonstrate their own importance. How deeply I wanted my friends to stand up for me and simply support me with words of defense and encouragement. Instead, they watched with interest to see how I would escape the situation and remained silent. I had to ask Jesus for help with all my soul, and help came. But how many times have I myself been such a silent friend, watching indifferently while the world dealt cruelly with my friends and doing nothing to save them?

When a friend returns to the world to die there, am I ready to lay down my life for him, plead in prayer for his salvation, and attempt everything possible to keep him from taking that step? To my shame, I must say that sometimes I do not even understand what I need to do. At times, I simply watch, regret his decision, and do nothing more than respect his choice.

When I first came to God and believed in Christ, I looked for a church not on the basis of true biblical teaching but on the basis of whether there were people there who needed me and would find me interesting. It was foolish, but this was how I searched for new friends and went from church to church, thirsting for friendly fellowship. I did not yet know the laws and principles of friendship we are studying, but I intuitively understood that they should exist among God’s people. They do exist, but the very best place for these laws is within my own heart.

When I write these lessons, I spend two hours of my life on them every morning. That time is enough to prepare one lesson that can be read in six minutes. I set aside this time in the hope that this portion of my life will benefit someone. Then, throughout the day, I review homework assignments and rejoice that my time has not been spent in vain. I thank God that in this way, I can give hours and minutes to my friends.

How joyful it is to hear that they find time to receive my investment in their lives and spend portions of their own lives receiving it.

How much of our lifetime do we give one another through communication? Am I ready to lay down my life by reminding a friend that I am here, asking about his needs, and taking part in meeting them? Sometimes there is no time for this, and sometimes there is no desire. Work, work, work.

At times, I simply want to die for someone—to fall asleep and not awaken—and thereby give my life. But what would be the purpose of such a foolish death? It is better to live and ask for wisdom about how best to give my life for God's glory.

There are many questions that are difficult to answer honestly. Inventing a beautiful answer is always easy. How many times I imagined myself a hero in future battles, but when they entered my life, I tucked my tail and fell. Yet Jesus teaches us.

The time is approaching when everyone who kills us will think that he is serving God by doing so. We will all pass through the fire. Some of us will burn in it, while others will be purified.

Love gives the correct answer to this statement of Christ. Love itself is the willingness to lay down one's life for a friend without fearing the consequences, because love cannot live or act in any other way.

Bible Verses for Reflection

1 Corinthians 13:3; 1 John 3:16; John 3:16; 10:11–12; 13:1.

## A Good Fishing Spot

If you ask any fisherman whether it matters where he fishes, I do not think he will say that it makes no difference. The main thing, however, is to have a fishing rod. Fishing is an entire field of knowledge that must be mastered. Every field has rules, as well as exceptions to those rules. Every fisherman has a special place where the fish bite best, where they are plentiful, and where it is simply interesting and pleasant to enjoy his favorite activity.

It is also very important to have the proper tackle and bait, because every fish has its own characteristics and preferences.

There are also “good fishing spots” for catching friends. One of them is a table where you share wholesome food.

If there is an unclaimed seat at the table, you can take a very advantageous position for gaining new friends. The atmosphere is relaxed. Everyone is enjoying the meal. Conversation becomes a pleasant addition to the beginning of a friendship, and hearts are open to receiving a new person. If a soul is inclined toward friendship, it can experience it very quickly at the table. Later, this person may become dear and close for life. If this happens while visiting someone or attending a large gathering, you do not even have to spend time preparing the food.

This art is drawn from the life of Jesus. He greatly enjoyed eating with different people. Publicans and sinners invited Him, and He ate with them. At that time, this challenged society and its accepted norms. But through His behavior and attitude toward people, Christ destroyed such stereotypes and gave me an example to follow.

If a person is closed to communication or does not desire to develop a relationship with you, your presence with him at the table obligates neither of you to anything. You are simply eating together.

For example, if I simply approach a person and begin a conversation or try to become acquainted with him, I will be rejected in most cases. At the table, however, the opposite happens.

The gift of hospitality includes offering food and eating it together at one table while communicating with one another. Sometimes this joins strangers so closely that for the rest of their lives, they remember the invitation and meal with gratitude.

Even in Eternity, a marriage supper is being prepared for all the redeemed. We will all sit together at one table with Jesus, joyfully listen to His every word, admire Him, and look upon one another with love while anticipating the joy of new acquaintances. We will eat the fruit of the Tree of Life and other delicacies. Our kind Jesus will look with satisfaction upon the travail of His Soul.

In His message to Laodicea, our Lord promises that if anyone hears His voice and opens the door to Him, He will enter and dine with that person, and that person will dine with Jesus. In gratitude for an open heart, Jesus offers to share a meal. Through this friendly fellowship, He can reveal Himself to me and open me to Himself.

Please remember all the meals you have shared with strangers. During the meal, they became friends or good acquaintances. The wall of separation fell, and you gained access to this person as someone you know, while he also came to know you.

When a single man wants to know a new female friend more closely, he looks for an opportunity to spend time with her at a table. While sharing drinks and food, he can become better acquainted with her. For this purpose, he invites her to a café or restaurant for a more detailed acquaintance. There they come to know one another better. If they also have an opportunity to prepare the food together, they learn even more about each other and preserve this knowledge throughout life. There is something about food that draws us closer.

When I understood this, I tried intentionally gaining friends at the table, and I can tell you that it works. At first, I was surprised myself. Then I began using it to find new friends or maintain relationships with old ones. Miracles occur as unfamiliar hearts draw closer.

I am always saddened when I see someone withdraw into a corner and silently eat his bread while staring at his plate. Unfortunately, such people are also among us. But they need help as well. We can break their loneliness through our presence and friendliness. The gift of communication was given to us for the very purpose of communicating and expressing our love through words. It is so joyful to watch your kind and encouraging words enter a heart and, like a seed, sprout and bear good fruit. What happiness it is to love someone you previously did not know but later came to know, discover, welcome, and value as a lifelong friend.

It does not always happen as easily as I describe it here. But if you move confidently toward the goal while remaining friendly and loving from a pure heart, the result will correspond to your effort. In the eyes of Heaven, you will be a victor even if the new friend runs away in fear or anger.

A loving heart respects another person’s freedom and senses the boundaries it must not cross.

If another person runs away in fear or anger, this does not necessarily mean that you frightened or angered him. It may indicate that he fears communication and friendship. Perhaps he is angry by nature and does not want to maintain such relationships with anyone.

Because love is gentle, it does not act aggressively. It very tenderly seeks points of connection and paths to the heart.

But I must remember that my potential friend sat down at the table to eat, while I am only an addition to the event. He may not even look in my direction. Yet this does not trouble me. There is always a fish waiting for the right hook with the right bait. If it is hungry, its chances of becoming yours are greater.

In this comparison, it is very important to remember that you are catching a fish not to eat it but to place it in the aquarium of your heart. There it will feel comfortable and safe, while the tenderness of your soul heals its wounds and works miracles of love within its heart.

From the moment your little fish enters your aquarium, it is yours and needs care, nourishment, and attention.

Jesus enters my life to remain there forever. He places me in His aquarium called the “Ocean of Love” and watches to ensure that any predatory fish entering this space are overcome by me and drawn to Him as new members of God’s family.

A prepared table has its own laws and exerts an enormous influence upon the human heart. When my friend sits at the table, his senses and perceptions become highly active. If the food is delicious, beautiful, and wholesome, I will appear the same way against its background. But if my friend is gnawing on a dry cracker, his close acquaintance with me may become associated with that hard food.

Love for people, tender words, attentiveness, respect, and the gift of friendliness can together produce great transformations within the heart of an unfamiliar person sharing the meal. He will most likely not become my friend immediately, but a seed of love will be sown in his lonely heart, and my later behavior will contribute to its growth.

Of course, my desire to gain new friends will play the principal role.

I also do not always see a new friend in every person. I may simply eat without noticing the person beside me if I have other purposes at that time. But because I understand the influence of sharing a meal, I add this knowledge to my resources and can use it for God’s glory. Love teaches me many useful things and goes into action when I decide to apply them in my life.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Matthew 9:10–13; Hosea 6:6; Luke 19:5, 8; 7:33–35, 44–48; Acts 2:46; Romans 12:13; Matthew 22:9; Revelation 3:20; 22:3–

4; Romans 12:20; Proverbs 11:25; Philippians 4:5; 2 Timothy 2:24–26; Isaiah 53:10.

## Speaking About God Without Unnecessary Words

Jesus possessed every gift in perfection. He had every right and authorization recognized in the spiritual world, and He used them as needed. The most remarkable of His experiences have come down to us. If we examine what the Lord spent most of His time doing, we see that He devoted the greatest portion of it to being with His disciples. In His public ministry, He spent more time healing the sick than preaching the Word. In His conversations with people, Jesus did not usually give direct answers. Instead, He responded with another question or revealed the essence of the truth.

I have always wondered why so little was written about Christ and why many of His disciples left us not even one line of instruction or testimony about our Savior. I would greatly love to know what He said in private conversations, how He spoke to people about God, whether He had a sense of humor, and how His joyfulness revealed itself among people.

How deeply I would love to sit at His feet, listen to His stories, and simply admire the One Who came to save me, Who loved me long before I existed.

If only I could catch one glimpse of this wonderful Man. But He said that those who have not seen and yet have believed are blessed, and this brings me joy. Imagine it: we love the One Whom we have never seen, listen to the One Who has never spoken a single audible word to many of us, and obey the One Who exists in our imagination. It is interesting that although we perceive God and His love differently, we still possess unity in this matter.

I often hear the expression, “I will tell people about God.” I have become so accustomed to it that I do not even stop to consider what it means. Now I have decided to understand what role it plays in my life and whether I actually do it.

The expression is very good, but I have also noticed that it has become something of a stock phrase. It serves as an excuse or a screen concealing my ignorance, laziness, and unbelief.

There are simple things I do not need to tell people because they can see them for themselves. For example, I do not explain to anyone that I am a man. It is true. I do not hide this truth and am ready to defend it, yet for some reason, no one asks me about it.

I have also noticed that when I begin communicating with strangers without saying a single word to them about God, they ask me Whom I believe in or which denomination I belong to. Sometimes they try to understand it by observing my life.

I never forbid people to use profanity in my presence, but for some reason, they decide on their own not to do so after they become better acquainted with me.

When I begin showing people love and friendliness, for some reason they understand me without unnecessary words.

I am also amazed that many of you begin considering me your personal friend simply by reading these lessons. You are so confident of it that you even write or tell me so, although I have not personally declared my friendship. Yet you understood me without words, received me, set aside a place for me in your heart, and then told me about it. I receive this, but I never spoke directly about friendship. How did you know? Some of you regard me as a friend but, out of modesty, will never say so because you fear rejection. But I am inclined toward friendliness and am ready to give it to anyone within the boundaries of that person’s choice.

In previous chapters, we discussed the fact that friendship contains a supernatural element, and this is true. When I come into contact with other people, God begins using me in a remarkable way according to the situation and the other circumstances in which I find myself. I may say one thing while people hear what they want to hear or what I represent. I know that something similar happens with every believer.

When I tell a stranger that God loves him, he most likely hears, “I want you to become like me.” Although I do not say this, it is what he sees in me.

What does it mean to “speak about God”? I do not want to diminish this expression. I want to understand what meaning I place within it and what others hear in it.

There was a time when I made this a rule in every conversation, regardless of whether people were interested. I directed all my communication toward this and then could not understand why no one wanted to maintain a relationship with me. Later, I changed my approach and tried to move toward the subject gradually, looking for the right moment to introduce an element of truth into the conversation. Often, our communication smoothly moved into spiritual matters.

Romans 10:17 states: “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” Knowing this principle, I try to sow the Word wherever possible. But the Lord also gives me an understanding of the kind of soil with which I am working so that I can anticipate the result. If all my efforts lead nowhere and the result is zero, I believe I should reconsider something and try a different approach.

If I operated a business merely for the sake of working and made no profit, I would quickly understand that I needed to change my policy and seek something better. But when I labor and witness in vain for years, for some reason I consider it a spiritual achievement. I believe the result is also important here.

To speak about God, I need to have this God in my heart, thoughts, and motives. I need to speak with God. God is Love, and this cannot be hidden. His desire is for other people to see this love as well. This is possible if it truly exists. People have many questions about love for which they desire to know and hear the answers. Love responds with joy.

When I go to people, I am more concerned about whether I will be able to tell them about my love or demonstrate it, thereby revealing God through this attitude and assuring them that He is better than I am. Sometimes I return to my old track and begin telling them directly the truths that are clear to me, but

people close themselves. Love, however, finds the key to the heart and seeks the best paths.

A philosopher once said that he would believe in God if he saw a true Christian. In these words, the world presents a challenge to us as believers.

I believe that if I demonstrate my holiness and knowledge to people while demonstrating my love only to God, this will not be a very good decision. But if I reverse these two things, it will be far more effective.

I cannot always testify about the truth or about God to everyone. But I am ready to do so. I can sow along the road, scatter seed among stones, and even sow among weeds. God has an abundance of this seed. But do I need wisdom in this matter? Do I behave this way with the money I earn through my labor? I believe that sometimes I need to conduct a deep analysis of my activities for my own sake. By witnessing merely for the sake of witnessing, I will learn something. But if it produces no result, I believe the matter should be reconsidered.

Love and friendship have nothing but advantages in this matter. They prepare the soil for the true seed and bear much fruit. Through you, they gain many friends for the Lord.

Show people God, and there will be a result. At times, many words are unnecessary, though faith comes by hearing. Let your heart speak, and let your love for people testify about a loving God. But this must be learned, and I believe our school teaches it.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Ecclesiastes 10:12; Proverbs 20:5; 15:4; Isaiah 32:20; Psalm 126:5; John 13:1; 1 John 2:6, 10; 3:23; 5:16; 3:18; Romans 10:9–10; 1 Timothy 1:5; James 1:5.

## Friendship in Our Time

Human beings were originally created to love, and this quality of the soul is embedded in every person's nature. Unfortunately, sin has distorted this quality, and what we have today does not always correspond to the original plan.

Upbringing in the family and at school, the distinctive features of the local culture, and the media all influence the development of the mind and shape a person's character. What is established in childhood sometimes accompanies me into old age.

Everyone understands friendship differently, and most often, this understanding is shaped by public opinion. That opinion erects high barriers in my mind that I do not dare cross. If I have been convinced that friendship in a certain form is impossible, I will not attempt to change this belief but will shape my relationships within the boundaries of that understanding.

Friendliness destroys many traditional ideas about friendship. When God gives me this gift, He also gives me wisdom to manage it while preserving relationships in purity, love, and holiness. I must reconsider many established ideas about friendship and introduce new rules. But if I continue living within the old boundaries, those walls will surround me. Eventually, my growth will stop because I will be unable to overcome what I have declared impossible for myself.

Today, we have the internet and mobile communication. This is a major breakthrough in human history and an innovation that must be taken into account.

Some people continue living in the old way and do not want to change anything in their lives because they have chosen to retain the simplicity of their approach to life. This should be respected. There are many opinions about the influence of these innovations upon the individual. We will not focus upon that issue here, but this diversity must be considered and accepted. When we accept these discoveries, we should use the

new possibilities that do not fit within the old culture. When young and elderly people come together, they do not understand one another, and a conflict between generations arises.

Through the internet and its possibilities, a person can very quickly study any field of knowledge and can become well known, famous, or wealthy. He can create his own community and gather like-minded people from around the world. He can start his own church and preach through it to the entire world.

A person can also gain new friends and build friendships with them without ever meeting face to face. We should accept these distinctive features of our time and use them for God’s glory. In doing so, we need help and wisdom from above.

God understands the internet very well and knows how it can be used for good, including to gain friends through it.

But we must also recognize that the concept of friendship on social media is very vague. For example, I have more than one thousand Facebook friends, many of whom I do not know at all. Yet they are labeled as friends, and my daughter believes that I maintain relationships with all of them and therefore becomes jealous of them. As a friendly person, I would not object to becoming better acquainted with each of them and personally loving that individual.

This raises the question: where can I find time for all my friends? I want to answer according to my understanding.

How many friends will I have in Eternity? I believe the number will include all the redeemed, all the holy Angels, and representatives of other planets. Together, they will form an impressive group. My goal is to know all of them more closely and deeply.

Let us imagine that there will be about one billion of them. I will need to give each one sufficient time, enter into the essence of his soul, and discover a new planet. This will require definite effort on my part and a tremendous amount of time. I will also need an excellent memory and profound thought

processes to absorb everything I learn. I cannot do without God. I hope for a miracle within my mind that will enable me to be everywhere with everyone at the same time, retain everything in my memory, and develop endlessly.

God will give me this capacity of perception and will continually renew and perfect it.

My Eternal life has already begun through faith in Jesus Christ. I am already living by the laws of Heaven written in the Bible. I strive to understand the essence of the union between what is earthly and what is Heavenly.

My understanding of friendship has changed, but it now suffers no loss. I do not lose friends even when they are very numerous. I become attached to them with all my heart and take note of all their distinctive qualities so that I can build relationships while avoiding “sharp corners” and showing tact and love. Without God, this is impossible, but with Him, everything is possible. He gives me these relationships and arranges matters so that whenever possible, they are mutual and do not descend upon me all at once.

When I am overloaded beyond my strength, the Lord waits for me to give these cares to Him. He gladly takes everything I cast upon Him.

The presence of Christ is necessary in every relationship and every friendship. Otherwise, it will be an emotional, earthly, fleshly undertaking that will someday collapse and bring much suffering. In Christ, every friendship gains a special status and meaning. It is no longer merely an earthly decision but something that binds us with eternal ties—unconditionally and forever.

A friend is like a child. At one time, he was not part of my plans, but through my deep knowledge of God and my relationship with Him, a person called a new friend appeared in my life. He was not present before, but now he exists, and he is an inheritance from the Lord. All children are different, and no two friends are identical.

Of course, I also have my own character and distinctive qualities. Therefore, I do not claim to possess the most correct understanding of truth. Jesus is the Truth, and within Him lies the meaning of eternal development and progress.

We should not fear the new opportunities available today for gaining true friends, but we ourselves must also become genuine. Once again, we come to Christ. Without Him, this is impossible, but I can do all things through Jesus, Who strengthens me.

If I establish boundaries in my mind concerning my understanding of friendship, God will work within those boundaries of my perception and bless me in small things if I allow Him. If I go farther and enter more deeply, He goes with me and opens new possibilities.

Friendship is a boundless ocean of knowledge and development that each of us should discover and expand. It has no boundaries. It extends into Eternity so that there it may always develop and amaze us with endless discoveries. But to know what is eternal, we need a union with the Eternal God. Otherwise, everything will be limited by earthly boundaries and interests. God makes all things new. He greatly enjoys rebuilding the ruins of my shattered stereotypes according to His Eternal standard.

Now the Lord is opening unique possibilities for discovering love and friendship. Yet these fields of knowledge should be studied and developed in one’s personal life. Jesus will teach and guide in this direction everyone who chooses this path.

My friends are also those who will support me during difficult times. In answer to their prayers, God will perform miracles in my life, and in answer to my prayers, He will perform miracles in the lives of my friends.

We should not fear the distinctive features of our time but should use them wisely for God’s glory.

The Lord will give us wisdom to know how best to do this and accomplish it.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Psalm 111:10; 119:113; 127:3; Isaiah 58:12; 60:3; 2:3; Romans 12:2, 10, 13.

## A Deliberate Offensive

We have now reached the culmination of our theoretical knowledge about friendship, which smoothly transitions into practical skills.

I will describe how this takes place in my life, and you may decide for yourself whether this method is suitable for you. Whenever I begin presenting this subject, for some reason, everyone becomes very joyful. Perhaps each person imagines himself as the “victim of the offensive” and looks forward to the consequences.

As we have already noted, an overcomer is someone who does not sit behind an impenetrable defense but goes on the offensive. This is easy to define, but how can it be put into practice?

Friendship begins with my decision to become a friend to a particular person. It is confirmed by the Holy Spirit as this decision of my will is put into action.

Sometimes this happens unexpectedly. My new friend knows that I am friendly, finds me himself, and makes it clear that he is interested in me. My heart immediately responds to such an invitation and rejoices over the new soul it receives. Afterward, in prayer, I ask for a blessing upon our friendship.

But perhaps my future friend does not know that I am friendly and would be glad to have a relationship with him. In that case, I might wait for him my entire life without ever seeing him come. To avoid depriving him of the joy of friendship with me, I decide to take the first step. I do not think public transportation or the street is the best “fishing spot,” although an invitation can also be made there.

Now I choose the “victim” of my offensive. The very first and best thing to do is pray for God’s blessing upon this undertaking. I begin studying this person and asking for special wisdom so that I can understand which key will fit the heart of my future friend. I pray for this soul and ask for special

blessings in his life. My heart is ready to receive this person forever while leaving him the right to choose what to do with me.

A person's freedom of choice must remain inviolable. This offensive requires special tenderness so that I do not cross these boundaries or build a relationship based on duty, fear, or guilt. I should also make sure that my friend is interested in me so that I do not torment his heart by irritating him with my offers or assistance. I pray for special discernment, and the Lord answers.

If there is an urgent need, I can even fast to make certain that I am honest in my decision to be a friend and to ask the Lord to place His Hand upon my efforts.

Then I approach this soul and begin a conversation. Depending on the situation, I may immediately declare my desire to be a friend and explain that for now, this is a one-sided decision that obligates him to nothing. At least this person now knows something about me and can decide for himself how to respond. But the word has been spoken, the seed has been sown, and the process of receiving and germinating this message begins in my friend's mind.

I ask for special wisdom about how to behave next. I try to understand what is suitable for this person, what he dislikes, which subjects interest him, and what his soul loves. I enter the world of his interests and expectations and look for points of connection through which I can become attached to him with all my soul.

Being a friend is my one-sided decision, and it carries the risk that I will be rejected. I will have to continue living with that rejection while my decision to be a friend remains unchanged. To avoid troubling a heart without good reason, I do not direct this weapon at the first person I meet. I choose someone whom the Lord has brought across my path.

I do not think about how our friendship will continue. First, I plan how to begin it, and I entrust all the consequences to God.

But after all the decisions and prayers, the most important thing is to take the first step and go on the offensive. The offensive can take different forms, but its essence is the same: to make my presence known, to make it clear that I exist, that I rejoice because this friend has appeared in my life, and that I greatly need him. I may express this through a simple greeting, an offer of help, or participation in meeting his needs. Everything depends on the situation. Then I observe his response very carefully and pray.

It is very important to notice my friend's good qualities and positive character traits. I can gather this information from his acquaintances and friends by simply asking them to tell me something good about him.

If my fleshly nature begins objecting to this decision and tries to persuade me to abandon the undertaking and not interfere in the person's life, I will not listen to that voice. Life without this friend in my heart would be uninteresting. How could I look into his eyes throughout Eternity, knowing that I could have become his friend here on Earth but failed to do so? What shame I would feel in my own eyes!

Once the first step has been taken and I have entered the person's private space through my greeting or carefully considered approach, I begin observing his response so that I can understand what to do next.

At this point, agape love is greatly needed because it can very quickly reveal the person with whom I am dealing and show me what to do next. Working together with me, love begins influencing the heart of my new friend. It helps me understand how best to act, what should be said, and what should remain unsaid. Sometimes love begins with words of love. Sometimes it touches a friend, helps him with his needs, or spends time with him. Some people can be told directly about my intentions and my desire to be their friend. Love possesses enormous persuasive power, and it should not be ignored. After all of this comes a time of waiting, which may last a fraction of a second or extend for several days. But the seed of friendship has been sown, and it needs time.

Perhaps my friend has no time for me because he has enough concerns and other friends. He may make this clear immediately. Yet my task is to convince him that I am different and purposeful—that I will be someone who thinks about the happiness of his friends and acts to promote it, and that I need nothing from my friend except the person himself and his heart.

I begin discovering what can make this wonderful person happy. I am not capable of everything, but I possess myself and my heart, which loves at all times and can give itself for his lifelong use. With this arsenal, I enter the battle and go on the offensive because I do not want to leave my friend living in this world without my friendship.

After reaching the goal and gaining another victory, I continually think about this person’s happiness and periodically remind him of my presence within the boundaries of the access and desire he has granted me.

There is no universal rule for everyone. Every person is a new discovery and an unusual experience. This brings special joy and emotion to my heart, even if, at first glance, nothing has succeeded.

An overcomer is someone who rises from his chair and goes on the offensive, leaving questions about securing the territory and dealing with the consequences to the Lord. God Himself goes ahead and prepares the way for the battle. It is a very fierce war. All my fears, selfishness, laziness, alienation, and loneliness rise against me. Together, they declare that I may lose them forever and must make an extremely difficult choice. I choose love and friendship, and I go on the offensive. May the Lord help me.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Luke 16:9; Philippians 4:8; 1 John 4:10–11; Romans 5:5–8; Matthew 4:19.

## Faithfulness to God in Love and Friendship

Have you ever seen a house built without a foundation? It might be a mobile trailer, a shipping container, a tent, or some other form of temporary shelter. Such structures can be very useful for a limited period or during an emergency. But they are entirely unsuitable for times of trial or permanent residence.

If I begin building a house with the roof and afterward start laying the foundation, I believe I will encounter serious problems during construction. I find it difficult even to imagine what the final result might be.

Once someone asked me, “What do you believe in?” I knew the answer and immediately said that I believed in Jesus. Then I was asked another question: “What is the foundation of your faith in Jesus? How do you understand His teaching? How do you live while believing in God?” I began to think. Where is the foundation of my faith in reality? If there is none, any teaching or false doctrine that appeals to me may become my foundation. I will become established in it if I do not know God’s view. In that case, my life will be built upon a false foundation.

Consider love and friendship. These two sisters exert a very powerful influence upon the minds of others. They know how to open hearts and give people joy. When I begin living in this atmosphere of Heaven, I notice how many wonderful people appear in my life. If I compare some women with my wife, I will honestly say that my wife loses by every comparison. Yet I also love her, and she is the person closest to me, possessing the status of my wife. But suppose that while loving my wife, I find a female friend whom I decide to love from a pure heart just as I love my wife and secretly become a faithful husband to her without society knowing. How does this appear in the eyes of Heaven? It is obvious adultery. But I do not consider it so because I love this person, and she is a friend after my own heart. Moreover, this sister believes in God, loves Him, and loves me as well. She is a very active missionary and sincerely performs many good deeds. Besides all this, the sister is not married!!! You understand nothing about love. You do not know

my true motives! Everything between us is pure and for life, and only death will separate us!!! What does such love look like? I do not think a person even needs to be a believer to understand that love without faithfulness is not love but the lust of the flesh.

Many of you receive everything I write as a message from God. You see how God works by using my abilities and talents to convey this light. But your trust is based on the fact that I also live according to the truths I present. You assume that I am pure before God and His law, that I share what fills my own life, and that I possess what I teach you. This is normal. Therefore, the message exerts a special influence because God uses those who serve Him faithfully while asking Him for greater love.

But the enemy of my soul knows that one unfaithful step on my part can destroy all my work in a single moment. Therefore, he looks for an opportunity to destroy me. Yet by God's mercy, I am alive. Through your prayers and my own, I am preserved from evil. Through love from above, I develop and grow.

If I suddenly begin teaching you that all religions testify about the same God in different ways, I believe all my writings would immediately become dangerous to you. There would be a possibility that this philosophy permeates them in every direction. In the Christian world, there is a rule that all the writings of an author, even very correct ones, are declared dangerous, removed from circulation, and destroyed if the author departs into heresy or returns to the world.

Martin Luther was once asked to renounce his writings and messages and acknowledge the teaching of the church against which he had spoken as true and correct. Martin replied that if anyone could refute his arguments on the basis of Holy Scripture, he would immediately renounce his convictions. But if no one could do so, this testified that his messages were true and contained no darkness. "Here I stand. I can do no other. May the Lord help me!" These famous words of Luther entered Christianity as a symbol of the solid foundation of biblical teaching.

Upon what do I build my faith? What is the foundation of my love and friendship?

A tent is useful for spending a night in warm weather or sheltering from rain. But living in it permanently causes much discomfort. A house with every convenience looks far more attractive than a tent. Yet if the house has no foundation, a person may live in it wonderfully and without difficulty until the first natural disaster. A small hurricane, flood, or earthquake can very quickly deprive him of his home, leaving him standing before a pile of debris. He will look at it and wonder what went wrong. Then he will remember all the advice he previously heard about laying a foundation and every appeal to be a wise builder. At the time, such counsel disgusted him. What will he think now? And what if members of my family, or I myself, are buried beneath that pile of debris? What can be done then?

Something can still be done about a house, and a family can be created again. But what will happen when I look toward Heaven and see Christ coming from there with all His Angels, raising and gathering all the redeemed? One after another, they rise to the clouds, while He does not even look at me. When I cry out, “But what about me, Lord?!” He calmly answers, “I do not know you.” What will I do then? At that moment, it will truly be too late. I will stand there remembering all my teachers and pastors who urged me to receive the truth or, on the contrary, confirmed me in their errors by teaching that such conduct was right because everyone acted that way. I will understand that throughout my Christian life, I built upon sand. My little house collapsed directly upon me, and great was its fall. Then I will no longer be able to correct anything. All my achievements and talents will become nothing. My entire life will prove empty, and all my money will become garbage. I will no longer be able to continue living in my sins but will be destroyed as one of the wicked.

Perhaps it is better to prepare now for the coming event and lay a solid foundation for my faith. The opportunity still exists. There is still time. God’s grace still offers a chance. The fact that I belong to the true church with genuine teaching does not

make me right. What is right must be present within my heart and mind, and I must personally allow it to enter there—with God’s help, of course.

The Lord Himself promised that with His Own Hand, He would write His laws upon my heart and teach me His statutes. What does this mean? For example, I once believed that an unregistered partnership—living together outside marriage—was good and that there was no reason to spoil a page in one’s passport. But after believing in God, I allowed Him to teach me the truth that the marriage bond is holy and should be legally registered with the government, because only then will it receive God’s blessing and approval. I believed this, and God wrote this law concerning the family into my mind and heart. I now live according to this ordinance and consider everything else to be sin and a violation of the law. I do not intend to act as I once did, nor do I approve of this behavior in the lives of others, because sin is lawlessness. In this way, God brings order to every area of my life.

My love and friendship dwell very joyfully in a strong house upon a solid foundation. This is the foundation upon which I build.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Psalm 89:14; 119:160; Isaiah 26:18; Luke 1:3–4; 6:48; 1 Corinthians 3:10–15.

## Do Not Give What Is Holy to Dogs

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives a most mysterious warning and commandment that is not explained afterward. We read in Matthew 7:6: “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.”

This appeal should be examined so that we may avoid the sorrowful consequences Christ also describes.

Love and friendship involve beautiful qualities of the soul that are pleasant for a converted person to possess and express toward others. Meekness, innocence, trust, simplicity, kindness, and generosity all flow from a loving heart and bring joy to the soul when there is an opportunity to share these fruits.

Jesus experienced much. From His life experience in observing people, He gives us this remarkable warning.

“Give not” means that when you possess something, you should keep it to yourself.

That which is holy is something dedicated to God and rightfully belonging to Him. It must not be used for other purposes. When the Lord gives me Divine qualities of the soul, He also gives me wisdom so that I can handle this weapon and use it for its intended purpose. He gives understanding and leads me through life experiences to teach each of us to distinguish different types of people intuitively and understand when to speak and act and when to remain silent and leave.

A pearl represents the most valuable and extremely rare Heavenly treasure in the world. When you find it, you should sell everything to obtain it. I believe the message to Laodicea offers us precisely what can be called such a pearl.

Dogs and swine were animals that in Christ’s time, and partly in our own, gathered in packs when they had no owners. They lived near populated areas and fed upon human waste. At times, they also attacked people.

In our time, the idea of a dog has changed. It is associated with a kind household pet that loves its owner and brings joy through its faithfulness and unconditional love. Their affection and friendship often amaze us, and many human beings could learn from them. “But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee…” (Job 12:7).

But in ancient times, these animals produced fear and disgust because they were very dangerous.

Within the context of Scripture, this comparison points to a particular type of person among whom we are compelled to live.

One day, the counsel of Jesus that we are examining became completely clear to me when I personally encountered such people.

There was a period in my life when I changed jobs in 1999 and joined a construction company with two work crews. In the simplicity of my heart, I was open and joyfully shared my spiritual discoveries and blessings with these new people. But over time, incomprehensible things began happening.

One crew supervisor greatly enjoyed talking with me and asked many questions about spiritual and everyday matters. I gladly shared my knowledge and completed everything required in my work. Other coworkers warned me to be careful when communicating with this man, but I did not understand the problem. Over time, however, I began noticing that all my words, stories, and actions were passed on in distorted form. The company owner was friendly toward me at first. But as time passed, he began making many accusations and saying very strange things directly to my face about me and my work. I was amazed and could not understand what was happening. But when I began hearing my own words about myself repeated by my supervisor with a distorted meaning, I understood that this man loved rolling everything in the mud of his worldview and presenting all information to others in that form. He did this very convincingly, not from evil intentions but simply because he did not know how to act differently.

The second crew supervisor was friendly and not very communicative at first. Over time, however, he began venting his anger upon me and finding fault with everything. At times, the relationship became so tense that I felt as though I were on a battlefield. Eventually, the situation became physical, and I had to strike back, which I deeply regretted afterward. It was very painful to understand that I had allowed an evil spirit to take control of me and perform the service of resolving every problem by a quick method. But I loved Jesus and wanted to be an exemplary Christian. I could not act according to the flesh because I understood that this would bring me great suffering and torment of conscience.

While working among such people, I came to understand for myself who the dogs and swine are and how cautious we must be when communicating with them.

I take no pleasure in calling other people by these names. Yet among them are people with such a character, and we do not have the power to change this ourselves. I, too, was like this when I did not know Christ. Even now, I never speak about what I did during my godless life. When you possess love, so many useful subjects and fascinating revelations become available that there is no reason to return to filth and a dog's vomit (2 Peter 2:22).

Whom did Jesus mean when He gave us His counsel? Scripture contains a description of such people. We read in Psalm 22:16: "For dogs have compassed Me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed Me: they pierced My hands and My feet."

The prophetic events that Christ would experience are then described further. We know who stood at Calvary that day and who shouted the sentence against the Son of God.

Who are these animals today? How can they be identified? They may be the people closest and dearest to me. They may be members of my family, and I myself may be the same. The Lord's task is to purify me and then teach me to distinguish the clean from the unclean, see the contrast between darkness and light, and choose what is better.

This raises the question of how to love when such limitations exist and how to be a friend when such people surround us. A little earlier, Jesus answered this question as well. We read in Matthew 5:44: “But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.” Do you see the expression of love in this commandment? I see it and experience it.

For me, not giving that which is holy and not casting pearls means that I must be very cautious in communication, control every word, avoid controversial subjects, and remain silent concerning areas that will provoke rage or evil speaking. At the same time, it is important to remain a loving friend and speak through the language of good deeds and polite expressions. Love teaches this.

I will not change the world, but I can show it God’s love and my friendliness in response to attacks. The Lord gives me strength to do this.

The Lord teaches us that we are His witnesses. How fascinating it is to be a witness of God’s love! I allow the Holy Spirit to live within me and form God’s character traits. I become someone through whom He can reveal the Lord’s kindness and power to the world. I come to know things that were great and hidden from me, and I enter the battle, allowing God to go before me and gain the victory.

I begin to understand with my heart that there is a Divine Family Who has become mine and opened Their arms to me in order to make me Their son forever and live with me eternally.

Love is God’s presence within my heart, bringing joy, happiness, and peace.

“Give not.” This also deserves our attention.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Psalm 22:18; Proverbs 20:19; 22:24; 24:21; Isaiah 56:10–12; Revelation 22:15; Proverbs 26:11; 2 Peter 2:22.

## In the Nets of Love and Friendship

I ask God for love and friendliness, and He gives them to me. Together with them, He also sends trials. After these trials and victories, He gives revelations about what I experienced, learned, and understood. Then I draw a conclusion.

Jesus promised that He would make us fishers of men, and I see this promise being fulfilled in my life.

He taught me to catch you in my nets of love and make you my friends, never releasing you from this net.

The interesting thing is that I do not bind anyone to myself or violate anyone's will by forcing him to be my friend. I simply love these people, think about their happiness, help according to my strength and opportunities, rejoice in them, pray for them, and am very happy that they are present in my life. I simply cast the nets and wait for the next friend to enter them, while leaving him the opportunity to leave. Yet for some reason, they do not want to run away and even respond with mutual friendship.

Being a fisher of men is a special gift from God, and it is available to everyone who longs for love and friendship.

The truth about God is revealed in the Word of God and also in our attitude toward people. If they see Jesus in you, He will certainly reveal the beauty of His love to them through you. Then He will work miracles of friendship and love for their good.

But not everyone desires this, and not everyone is capable of it.

Some fishers go out to catch people with dynamite, clubs, spears, and false doctrines. They stun, maim, and kill, and afterward boast about their trophies. But when healing takes place, the "trophies" run away forever and become very difficult to catch again.

Love and friendship form a very delicate yet strong net. It captures its catch so skillfully that the person caught finds

happiness and experiences revival and transformation. He no longer desires to leave. He sees that he has come under the influence of your love and feels comfortable and peaceful within it. This person may be on the other side of the Earth, yet remain within your net with no intention of leaving.

But the most beautiful and strongest net belongs to Jesus. Everyone caught within it shares one space, comes to know the others, draws closer, and becomes dear and close.

It is written of Jesus' disciples that they left their nets and followed Him. In other words, He caught them in His Own net—the best net—from which they had no desire to escape.

How wonderful it is to see the fruit of your fishing, communicate with these people, rejoice in them, and tenderly preserve them in your heart!

Because every loving person may encounter complete misunderstanding toward himself and what is in his heart, we should always remember the experiences of Jesus. Studying the life and teachings of Christ greatly helps us make correct decisions in difficult situations. It provides a proper understanding of what is happening in my life and why it is happening.

For example, because I possess love for others within my heart, I can share with you from my own perspective what I hear, see, and experience.

I love—this is my decision, my position, my answer to many difficult questions that are sometimes extremely hard to answer. It is the direction of my life and my daily choice to follow this principle. All of this takes place within my mind. Somewhere deep within the heart, reason makes this decision and declares it in morning prayer while asking for support from above. The will agrees with this choice and begins acting in the chosen direction. The intellect brings every thought into harmony with the purpose of living, thinking, and developing within these boundaries. In its essence, this is something deeply personal between God and me. Yet the decision has been made, and I take a step in that direction. I am not Love; I am

learning it. Especially at the beginning of this path, I see how many mistakes occur in my life and how many difficult situations arise along the way. But I seek a solution within the boundaries of love and find it. I also try to write down some of my observations and share them. I desire that if someone takes this path and encounters what I have encountered, it will be easier for him to endure the trial, understand its essence, and see the best solution.

I do not try to show my love to someone or prove it to anyone. There is no truth in doing so. Love exists, and it knows, sees, and senses its time to act and overcome. It is evident to everyone to whom God reveals it. But a blind person finds it difficult to behold the beauty of love. In his eyes, it remains darkness no matter how hard you try to present it. Even so, loving is always better and more right. When you act this way, you will never lose. Without love, you will never become an overcomer or receive what has been promised to overcomers.

Love, and it shall be given you. Love, and you shall find. Love, and the door shall be opened to you. Love, and you will see more than you can imagine. For everyone who loves receives from above, everyone who loves finds, and to everyone who loves, the door will be opened. Great will be your reward in Heaven, and you will be sons and daughters of your Heavenly Father. What could be better?

I also came to understand that love can be demonstrated and seen only through deep personal interaction with another person, when love sees a problem and begins actively helping to resolve it. It is as though you take this weapon from your arsenal and begin using it when there is a need. And it works. Love studies another person’s soul very cautiously, tenderly, and delicately, then offers what will benefit him. But he himself must decide to open his heart to your love.

Some people see the actions of my love and open their hearts to its influence. Some remain indifferent. Others rise against me and begin despising me. Many different things happen. Some see more than you reveal, while others see nothing at all, and still others see everything differently. But I always look to Jesus

and try to understand how He evaluates and perceives the situation. Christ gives His approval or instructs me how I could act better if something similar happens again. And I learn. God's support along the path of love is the very best encouragement. We do not always receive this from people, but God will never leave me without His evaluation of my actions. This helps greatly.

Our world is wrapped in a different kind of net that binds the will and mind and makes everyone caught within it a slave of sin. But God's love breaks these bonds and invites us to cast ourselves into its nets of love and friendship, which are stretched above the abyss of sin to keep us from falling and being shattered to death.

I must now decide for myself into which net I will fall and with which net I will catch my friends. Then I must live and act according to that decision.

I choose the nets of friendship and love. How joyful it is to become entangled in them forever and have no possibility of escaping back into this world! How wonderful it is to enter someone's love and experience happiness and joy within it! How beautiful it is for all of us together to cast our nets of love and become caught in them, longing to remain in this condition forever.

Can you imagine the joy of Jesus when, after casting His net into the world, He draws in a rich catch that looks upon its Fisher and no longer desires to go anywhere else? Jesus takes us out of the aquarium of sin and releases us into His Ocean of Love, where we can become true little fish belonging to God. He has no intention of eating us but begins caring for each one of us individually in a special way.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Luke 5:5–10; Matthew 7:12; Proverbs 12:12; Matthew 13:47–48; Luke 11:13; Galatians 5:16; Romans 14:12–13; 15:1–3.

## Freedom in Friendship

Let me share a brief illustration.

At last, I have a friend! And what a friend!!! He loves me, too. I simply adore him. Perhaps there is nothing more wonderful than spending time with your friend, talking about anything, doing things together, and simply loving. And if you also share common interests and spiritual values, it is like paradise on earth.

I begin to live for this fellowship and dream that our friendship will never end.

The more time we spend together, the more convinced I become that my friend is my property. He is mine. Forever. He must understand this and behave in keeping with these demands and expectations.

The novelty of our relationship quickly fades, and now our friendship rests upon my deep inner attraction and strong emotional attachment. I realize that because I have such a friend, I do not need other people or new acquaintances, for my dear friend meets all my spiritual needs and satisfies all my emotional needs. Why look for anyone else? We are happy in our own little world.

Days, weeks, and years pass this way. We enjoy each other's company and realize that we need no one else.

When many people see our friendship, they try to enter into our relationship, but we do not want to share with others the intimate feelings we experience.

Then disaster strikes. My friend meets a young woman who begins taking up all his time and turns his attention away from me and toward herself. All our now-rare conversations come down to my having to listen to how wonderful this woman is.

She truly is a good person, but she is depriving me of my property and seeking to take my place in my friend's heart. He

does not object to this and constantly tells me so. What am I to do?

I do not want to destroy their relationship, but I see that something must be done. I realize that I am losing something very precious to me and that my friend has gone quite far in this new relationship. Therefore, if I hinder its development, he will choose to remain with this woman and push me aside. But that should not happen, for we are friends, and friendship is sacred and eternal.

I try to preserve our fellowship and constantly remind him of myself, making it clear that I also exist, that I also need attention, that I still want to talk, and that I have things to share. We try to maintain our relationship. But this new girlfriend immediately discerns my intentions and lets my friend know that she wants to be the one to whom he devotes his life; otherwise, she will step aside and no longer interfere with our friendship. Of course, my friend chooses her. Tension enters our relationship.

A wedding is now approaching, and I am invited to serve as one of the witnesses. I am pleased, yet I am also in pain, because I am losing something very close to me forever. How unfair this is!

Meanwhile, my relatives and good acquaintances continually tell me so many details from the lives of my friend and his girlfriend that I cannot stop wondering how blind I was in my love and how I failed to see what they see. But now I have become wiser, and I will no longer allow other friends to ‘lead me by the nose.’

Now my friend has a family and children. We still communicate, but no longer as before; now we do so cautiously.

I have embellished this situation a little in order to highlight certain aspects of such relationships. I can assure you that the friendship of people who do not know Christ differs from the friendship of Christians, or from the friendship of a believer with people who do not have Eternal Life.

Although friendship remains friendship in every situation, it may have different motives and rest upon different principles. The foremost principle of true friendship is that it respects a person’s choice and gives a friend complete freedom to choose the relationships and the degree of closeness he desires.

We live in a world with its own ideas and rules of friendship. They closely resemble spiritual ones. The two have much in common. As a result, when I become a believer, I want to bring my old ideas into my new life. This creates problems in relationships, and I do not understand why everything goes wrong.

The finest example of friendship is Christ’s relationship with me. He loves friendship, knows how to be a Friend, knows how to befriend me, and is the truest Friend of all. His treatment of me sometimes bewilders me. I judge Him by myself, but He is not like me; He is unique. I think that because I have done this or that, Jesus will now act in a certain way, because that is how things are done in the world. But He does not act according to my ideas; He has His Own understanding. Christ often surprises me by the way He treats me. He may embrace someone and hold that person close, bringing comfort in this way. He may speak tender words to one of His friends and look into that person’s eyes, yet pass me by without even looking at me or comforting me, leaving me to resolve everything alone. Still, Jesus will not abandon me forever. He will stand nearby and watch with interest as I struggle with my troubles and find a way out. Yet I so long for Him to embrace me, too, and settle everything with His gentle touch. In despair I cry, ‘Lord, dost Thou not care that I perish and suffer?!’ He watches me attentively and waits for something. But when I finally cry out, ‘Save me!!! I perish!!!’ He is instantly beside me and saves me. How am I to understand Him?

Yet in His love for me, Jesus helps me understand that I can handle many of my problems myself, for His grace is sufficient for me, while He treats those who are weak in faith with greater tenderness. I watch Him embrace them after hearing my stories and speak gently to them through my words, while

He does not even look at me. And I am so joyful that it happens at least in this way. How I wish I could always remain such a little child, lying in His arms and receiving His affection! But Jesus sends me out into the world on my own and teaches me to become independent. He always watches over me, however, keeping me within His sight and allowing me to make mistakes, fall, rise again, suffer bumps and bruises, and choose my path.

He respects my freedom and preserves me within it, and He forbids others to violate my personal space without my consent. He Himself does not enter where I do not allow Him to enter.

We were all created for one another, but we cannot make one another our property, even if we belong to the same family. To become another person's conscience is a serious violation of personal freedom and an area that is off-limits.

Every society has order, standards of behavior and morality, and rules of its own that must be considered and observed. But there is also something deeply personal that I must decide for myself. This personal realm includes what I am to understand, what I am to believe, whom I am to love, with whom and how I am to be friends, how I am to behave, and what kind of person I am to become. God respects my choice and does not violate my will, but He always offers the best path and promises to be with me if I choose Him. How fascinating this is! I am free to choose life or death, blessing or a curse, friendship or enmity, love or selfishness. He takes my choice into account and acts according to what I choose. When I respond to His counsel by saying that I have no time to study it or grasp its essence and meaning, He accepts even this and waits.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Deuteronomy 27:16; Micah 6:8; Zephaniah 2:3; Philippians 2:3; Matthew 23:8–11; Mark 16:9; John 13:1; Luke 17:17–19; Exodus 20:3–5; Romans 6:16; John 4:23; Luke 9:54–55; 1 John 4:1.

## Help Me Discover Myself

A good man sits on the shore of a lake and laments his fate: ‘Everyone around me is selfish. Everyone thinks only of himself, and no one thinks about me!’ Does this sound familiar? Every morning he smiles at himself in the mirror, studies the new wrinkles on his face, and remains unaware of many things about himself that are hidden within his heart.

God created human beings as social creatures. He made us for fellowship and life in society, so that we may grow and develop under the influence of God’s grace.

Each of us has an amazing potential of abilities that no one has called upon and that quietly awaits a treasure hunter, so it may reveal itself in all its beauty and power to anyone who begins to uncover it.

A great variety of good skills and talents has been placed within each of us, yet they remain buried beneath the burden of sin and the indifference of those around us.

If society judges me by my ability to fly, I will have to drag out a miserable existence all my life and consider myself a complete fool who was never able to meet the expectations of those around me.

‘I want you to become the kind of person who is convenient for me’ is perhaps the most foolish idea we try to impose upon one another, especially within families. It is no wonder that families fall apart, friendship disappears, and love grows cold. Of course, there are other causes of such tragedies, but the strength of a relationship has a root that firmly holds people in closeness. It is this: ‘You are very interesting and precious to me, and I want to discover something unique within you and draw it out for your benefit.’

God designed us to help one another discover the hidden treasures of our unique abilities and develop them as we need one another. Sometimes this happens by chance: someone compliments me after noticing something new or unique in my

behavior. I think about it and begin testing myself in that direction. Then I also notice this new ability and begin developing it. Wise parents usually study their children and uncover their talents, paying attention to what will benefit their child in the future and bring joy to those around him.

At every age, the heart waits for someone who will find the key to it and help it discover itself. Flattery will not accomplish this. It may charm me temporarily in order to achieve its own purposes and then leave me with nothing. But love will show another person what he finds beautiful within me and give him wisdom to draw it properly from my heart and develop it in the right direction. I do not object to such treatment, although modesty may lead me to resist a little and pretend that I do not think this way about myself.

Of course, if I am full of ambition, pride, and conceit, hardly anyone will be able to help me. Yet love is capable of finding an opening even in this maze and uncovering something good. A meek or searching heart offers more possibilities for discovery.

Loneliness does not develop my talents. If no one needs me or finds me interesting, if no one has any use for what I can offer, then for the most part I will not spend time discovering my talents. Even if I find and develop something, but no one recognizes it and I cannot at least demonstrate it, I will decide that it is not very important and will bury that ability forever.

Compliments, praise, delight, admiration, and sincere, kind words from those around me help me see myself through different eyes. Are you drawn to people who act this way? Personally, I greatly enjoy such company. Very interesting and good things are uncovered within it, bringing tremendous joy to the heart. It is a natural magnet that draws my heart toward such people with invisible threads. How joyful this is!

I am now writing in the first person, focusing all attention upon myself and describing my unspoken expectations. But I can also become the person who begins finding hidden treasure within those whose lives touch mine. To some degree, our lessons help us see ourselves through different eyes. Yet face-to-face contact

is much more valuable and has a stronger influence, although the imagination can also reveal a great deal.

Do not be afraid to love one another, even when the relationship is one-sided. Love is a good seed. To be a loving person opens enormous possibilities. It gives me the advantage of gaining friends, doing good, bringing love, happiness, and friendship into the lives of others, resurrecting dead souls, and giving the water of life to those who are parched and thirsty. The world is moving toward destruction, but few people want to perish. Although love has grown cold in many hearts, it is still needed, it still has value, and many people are searching for it.

Yet people sometimes no longer want to hear anything about love. They want to see it and feel it directed toward them. Until that happens, I will be nothing more than a smooth talker in their eyes. On the other hand, not everyone wants to receive love in the pure form of innocence and holiness, because it begins to convict them, offer a better prospect for life, and reveal the beauty of God—something to which few will agree.

But the soul of a believer is more accessible to discovery. It quietly cries out: ‘Help me discover myself! I want to know my calling and my place in the temple God is building. Find the hidden treasures within me, so that through my ministry I may give them to you. Lord, give me as a gift to the person who needs me!!!’

There is another enemy of such discoveries. It introduces itself by name: ‘I have no time!’ In reality, time exists, but priorities have been arranged incorrectly. When I say this, the person beside me hears: ‘I am sorry, my friend. You do not interest me.’ And the word ‘you’ includes both the person and his talents.

Yet in my heart I do not condemn such treatment, because I am the same way. I have learned to do it with a smile.

Our way of communicating is remarkable. I ask God for changes and new friends, but then I destroy the very foundation for them with my own words and wonder why God does not answer. I ask Him to give me a life partner, yet I do nothing to

find that person or, once I have found that person, to help my partner discover who he or she is—for both of us.

My lack of interest in people produces indifference from them in return. We sow these remarkable seeds of disinterest in one another, then expect a wonderful harvest of good fruit and become sad when it does not appear. We accuse others of selfishness.

I decide to change the course of time and enter the path of love, happiness, and friendship. I have noticed that these seeds also possess power and produce exactly what I sow, only many times more than I expected. A person must be very foolish to expect something good from others without first giving them that good. This law of sowing and reaping works wonderfully in love.

Love opens many hearts. In its light, people discover many interesting things about themselves. At times, they do not even realize what talents are hidden within their hearts or what powerful potential they possess despite their outward appearance and physical weakness.

God has left no one without talents. I sit on the shore of the lake and dream of meeting my explorer or prospector—the person who will notice me and help me discover myself. But until that person comes, I will learn this profession myself and go searching for hidden treasures. Oh, how many of them surround me! And where can I find time for all of them?

Bible Verses for Reflection

Philippians 4:8; 1 Corinthians 13:12; Romans 12:16; Matthew 25:15; Proverbs 27:9; Ecclesiastes 6:12.

## The Mirror of Love

I think each of you has a mirror at home. It is unique because it always tells us the truth to our face, although not everyone is pleased by that truth. The mirror itself possesses no power and does not set out to change my appearance. It can only show me what is there.

God’s law is also a mirror of the soul. It was spoken by God Himself and has not been changed by Him to this day. But the law does not change my life. It only tells me that my life does not meet its requirements. It points out transgressions. Jesus revealed the spirit of the law to me, helping me understand that all His commands apply not only to my actions but also to my thoughts. And the Lord desires to write His commandments upon my heart.

God’s law is good and holy for those who are good and holy, but it mercilessly exposes and judges those who violate it. The mirror of the law cannot lie. It speaks truth to my heart, but it does not resolve the problem of sin in my life.

Yet I have Jesus, Who reveals His will to me through His law and offers me His help and power to correct what is wrong in my life.

What is the mirror of love? What does it reflect and show me? Where can I see my love and understand how genuine it is? Your loving hearts, my friends, are my mirror of love, in which I see what I possess within my own heart. This is what makes our relationship special. You are a reflection of what is within me. Such a mirror tells me the truth, which is sometimes very bitter and difficult.

I look at my reflection in your love and see how sincere and genuine I am. And what do you see in me and in my love for you? You see yourselves and your love for me. I reflect to you who you are, and you tell me about myself.

If I begin judging myself by myself, I will most likely become self-absorbed. And if I am also proud, nothing good will come of

it. But if I want to know the genuine truth about my love, I bring it to you, because you are the ones who will show me everything you have seen and how it has affected you. Through your evaluation in the spirit of love and friendship, I come to know myself and understand how sincere, valuable, and truthful I am. And my love for you helps you see how filled with love you are and what still needs to be changed within your heart.

Let us consider an example. You examine yourself and conclude that you are a failure. That is a very bold self-assessment, and it instills confidence in you that this is indeed true. Then I appear —all beloved as I am—and begin persuading you of the opposite. I tell you how wonderful you are, what marvelous potential has been placed within you—so much that there was even enough for me—what great wings you have upon your back, and how your love has changed my life. You soar with joy because of this assessment. Through the revelations within me and the changes in my life, I have revealed the whole truth about you. I have become your mirror of love.

The Bible teaches in 1 John 1:7: ‘But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin.’ There is no love in deliberate isolation. Love is simply unnecessary and unseen if there is no one from whom it can be reflected.

Look at the night sky. Can you see the sunlight that penetrates space from every direction? No. You behold utter darkness. Light has visible power only when it is reflected from something, displaying the spectrum of every color and shade. The same is true of love. It needs someone.

It is difficult to see your love immediately in evil or deceitful people. Like ‘black holes,’ they absorb all the light and reflect nothing. But love heals even such hearts if they respond to its influence.

Yet in fellowship with those who love or strive toward this goal, God brings about amazing mutual discoveries. For example, if someone lies alone in a cold bed, it is very difficult for him to warm himself. He must wrap himself up tightly to retain his

warmth or heat the room. But if another person is beside him under the blanket, they will warm up very quickly by sharing their warmth with each other.

During my military service, I was placed in the guardhouse. It was winter, and I was put in a solitary cell without a window or a bed. Throughout the first night, I was freezing and could not sleep. Later, I was transferred to a shared cell, where it was also cold. At night, we lay close together, covered ourselves with our military overcoats, warmed one another, and slept that way. I do not remember those soldiers, but I remember how warm I felt with them in that cold cell.

We should not deprive ourselves of fellowship with our fellow believers. This is God's plan for our spiritual development and purification.

A mirror helps me see myself, examine my features, notice shortcomings, admire the beauty of God's creation, and make a decision.

The most sincere mirrors of love are our spouses. But if a spouse does not walk with God, he or she may become a distorted mirror and misrepresent the truth. Ideally, the two loving hearts of a husband and wife who believe in the one God are the finest reflection of God's love—first for each other and then for those around them.

It is very difficult for me to understand what I am truly like until I see the reflection of my love for you in the way it has helped you, and the reflection of your love in the way it has helped me. Such a relationship works miracles in our lives.

This quality is not easy to explain and is even more difficult to understand. Yet we have been given to one another for a reason: to cultivate mutual love in others. People who love me quickly reveal my own value to me—in God's eyes, in my own eyes, and in theirs as well. I see myself in a loving heart. This value is determined not by how wonderful I am, but by how my love has helped others feel that they are wonderful, make amazing discoveries within themselves, change for the better, and accomplish something remarkable. If my love has helped

you love yourself, discover the person within you, and understand your value in God’s eyes, then in this I can see a very good reflection of who I am. The same also applies to me. Your love brings changes into my life and shows you who you are.

The commandment that we love one another is very deep. We will explore it throughout Eternity without ever reaching the bottom of its revelations. This prospect brings me great joy.

The development of any child clearly demonstrates the power and influence of love. Begin scolding a child for every mistake and calling him hurtful names, and a lifelong sense of inferiority will form within him. But if this little person is treated with love and helped to make new discoveries within himself as a creative individual and as a human being, his development will be vigorous and well-rounded. We were created by Love for love, and only love can uncover the limitless potential within me. Love desires to do this from earliest childhood. But everyone had a different childhood. Even now, however, love can correct everything. It is powerful; it tears down strongholds.

If I have only one friend, that is better than nothing, but it is still not quite what I need. If there are many mirrors, they will convince me more fully of the truth about myself than a single mirror, because they will show me the same image from every side.

Whoever desires to have many friends must himself be friendly.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Proverbs 4:7–12; 17:17; Genesis 2:18; John 13:34; Ephesians 5:28, 33; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 1:7; 4:8, 11; James 1:23–25; Matthew 18:20.

## The Power of Friendliness

We were created by God for one another—for good works, fellowship, friendship, and love. When I understand this and come into harmony with God's plan, happiness begins following close behind me and stirring me inwardly through its influence.

Friendship is a trusting relationship between people based on love, respect, patience, mercy, selflessness, acceptance, and mutual affection. Common interests can also draw people together into communities, groups, and circles.

When we desire it, love for others very easily develops into friendship with a particular person.

I have discovered two kinds of friendship.

The first is emotional friendship. In this kind of friendship, all or some of the factors described above draw people together, provided that the other person does not violate the boundaries established within my heart or bring the relationship to a crossroads of conflicting opinions. The other person will do good to me or accept the good I do. Such relationships form very quickly and may last for years or a lifetime. Yet they may also be destroyed very quickly through the carelessness of one friend. When a broken friendship is restored, emotional barriers arise that keep the friend within certain limits. Unfortunately, many people build precisely this kind of relationship.

Social networks on the internet attempt to connect us and call this 'adding a friend.' Then they give us the option to 'unfriend' someone. I become accustomed to this state of affairs, live by this rule, and carry it into my own life.

The second kind of friendliness is the conscious decision to be a friend and accept a friend regardless of any conditions or circumstances. Such an attitude and decision has deep roots in a personal relationship with God, Whose character is reflected in one's life. The conscious decision to be a friend and behave accordingly may be one-sided. The person who makes this choice and does not retreat when trials arise remains a friend

for life, ready to love, help, accept, forgive, and understand. Such a practice becomes a source of special inspiration and reflection about what else can be done, and how it can be done, for a friend's happiness. God's love lies at the foundation of all such decisions and is the chief motivation and source of inspiration. The awareness that I am a friend fills my life with happiness.

A special joy comes when two people who have both approached their friendship consciously draw close to one another. Such mutual relationships are especially precious within the family, and a family like this may confidently be called happy. Its members continually live in the atmosphere of Heaven, drawing Heavenly angels and God's blessings to themselves. They think about one another's happiness, and as they achieve this goal, they experience that happiness themselves.

Friendship is an essential part of society. Without it, life becomes empty. A person grows spiritually ill and lives without a purpose or an understanding of life's meaning.

After creating Adam, God said that it was not good for man to be alone. The longing for fellowship and belonging to someone has been placed within every heart.

Believers draw close to one another very quickly, and their relationships often develop into one of these kinds of friendship.

Friendship is not based on age or gender. When a man and a woman are friends, their relationship always includes ethical standards and boundaries consistent with biblical principles and their culture.

A life and relationship of sin cannot be called friendship, although shared interests or evil deeds can bind people closely together even against their will. This kind of friendship does not bring happiness, but it does provide a sense of belonging to one's group or community.

When people speak different languages, even a close relationship between them is unlikely to become a deep, mutual

friendship, because friendship involves communicating in a language both understand.

‘A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly’ (Proverbs 18:24).

I am experiencing this personally and see how this principle works in my life. Once I decided that I would have no former friends; everyone would be either a present or a future friend. At times, it is difficult to understand how this should work, but my decision always shows me the best way out of every interpersonal crisis. When you love your friends at all times, you see a great deal both within them and within yourself. Yet the spirit of friendliness helps you notice the virtues and the better aspects of life while covering shortcomings with love and mercy. You may have to endure mockery, betrayal, evil speaking, and rejection, but love for a friend knows how to forgive all this and wait for change and better times. A special joy comes when your friend returns because he sees that you are genuine and steadfast.

But my decision to be a friend does not deprive my friends of freedom of choice. I respect their decisions and accept them as they choose to be.

Although a friendly person enters into relationships quickly, he still remains selective. Friendship with those who do not share your religious beliefs may prove dangerous to the soul. In one way or another, we influence each other, and that influence leads either to life or to death.

Therefore, the finest decision in life should be to establish a friendship with one’s personal Savior from sin—Jesus. He is a true Friend. He will never betray or forsake us. He is faithful to His promises and always fulfills them, although not always in the way I desire. He is an expert in every field, profession, and area of human life. He understands every detail perfectly and always has the best solution to every problem and task. Nothing is difficult for Him. He never changes and is faithful to His principles and His friendship. Friendship with Him and His example of friendliness teach me how to relate properly to my

earthly friends. Through His example and His Spirit, He lays the foundations of love and friendship within my heart and then helps me become established in them.

Jesus is the very best Friend. When I have Him, it is much easier to live amid difficulties and trials. He is always near to help and support me.

Christ also has a great many helpers: good angels who joyfully guard us in all our ways so that our feet will not stumble and we may stand firm.

I am friendly. This is a special kind of inspiration and a way of life. I have chosen this path for myself, and I am very happy. My friends know me and may have personally experienced the influence of friendliness upon their lives. They are special people within my heart. They know this and respond in kind. When I decide to be a friend, I ask God to establish me in this decision, teach me, and place His seal upon my choice. I see how His intervention strengthens me. Yet in all my decisions, I remain free and can decide for myself when and how my friendship, my silence, or a temporary separation should be expressed. None of these factors changes my attitude toward those whom I have chosen as friends for life.

Sometimes the decision to be a friend remains one-sided, and a person must carry it throughout life, waiting and hoping for changes and believing that they will come. Then, even when no friendship exists between us, my faithfulness to my friendly disposition brings me joy.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Proverbs 17:17; 18:24; 27:9; 26:24–25; Song of Solomon 2:9; Colossians 3:12–17; 1 Peter 3:8–9; Acts 2:44–47; 2 Timothy 3:1–5.

## The Beauty of Friendliness

To see the full beauty of friendliness, we must consider Who Jesus was when He lived in our world. God came to us and became a Man in order to reveal in mortal flesh the true character and love of the Most High. No angel could have revealed God's love and His friendliness to humanity as clearly and understandably as Christ did.

As I study the life of Jesus, I see how sociable, kind, and friendly He was. If I were asked to describe my friend and the qualities he should possess, I would most likely describe someone who, by every standard, resembled my Savior. There is, however, one difficulty that troubles many people. Even if I have an imperfect friend, I can see, hear, and touch him. Jesus is better than every person in the world, but He is invisible and intangible, and I can perceive Him only through faith and imagination. Yet no visible friend can help me resolve my spiritual problems as the invisible Jesus can. And the very best advice any earthly friend can give when difficulties arise will be: 'Let us ask Jesus to resolve this problem and help us stand firm.' And the Lord helps.

The spirit of friendliness is difficult for many people to understand. I often find myself in situations where I speak to my friends about my friendship toward them, and each person understands me according to the degree of his openness and knowledge. I am prepared to build relationships within the framework of my understanding and within the boundaries of the freedom my friends desire to have with me.

Every friendship has stages, and it is worth understanding them so that depth is not confused with superficial contact. If I am not permitted to develop a relationship, this does not mean that I am unfriendly or that the other person lacks the spirit of friendliness. It simply means that the freedom within our friendship does not wish to risk rejection. The higher the stage, the more painful it is when you are rejected or when your openness is used against you. Few people are willing to take the risk and open their hearts to the deepest level of a

relationship. Remaining guarded helps avoid the pain of rejection. In such a case, the safest friendship can be only with Jesus. He will never cause pain without a purpose, nor will He cast out those who come to Him.

Let us consider these stages of friendship. I learned about them in a seminar and am sharing them with you.

1. Greeting. I greet you, and you respond in the same way. There is a risk that you will not answer. This is unpleasant, but bearable. I have encountered situations in which I extended my hand for a handshake and was deliberately rejected, leaving me with many questions.

2. Exchanging facts and information. I may ask, 'How are you? How are you feeling?' or something similar, or I may suggest sharing news or recent events. A dialogue begins, and we exchange information about life, global problems, or insects. A pleasant conversation develops in which we can discuss problems with mosquitoes or matters of worldwide importance. Yet all my attempts to begin a dialogue may be met with silence.

3. Opinions and judgments. In our superficial interaction, I take a risk and express my point of view on a particular issue, while remaining willing to hear my friend's opinion as well. We begin sharing our thoughts and arguments. We may even consider controversial questions, disagree about something, or subject something to criticism. Here rejection becomes more noticeable, because it may wound my pride or make my friend uncomfortable. Sabbath School is built upon this level of interaction, where everyone is encouraged to participate and share his answers.

4. Sharing feelings. At this stage of a relationship, a desire arises to understand a friend's feelings, speak heart to heart, and share one's experiences. This is dangerous, but it is the only path to depth in a relationship. When I understand what my friend feels and share with him what I feel, an emotional bond develops between us. Our hearts open, and we allow each other to explore our inner experiences and even participate in

resolving certain problems. Every normal person needs such a close friend in order to meet this spiritual need. When people have no such friends, they seek a psychologist and are willing to pour out their experiences for money simply to find an outlet for their feelings. Those who have suffered the pain of rejection at this stage of friendship tend to close themselves off from everyone and allow no one into their inner world. They do not want to know their friends more closely, and afterward they themselves suffer because of it.

5. Sharing mistakes and shortcomings. Admitting guilt. At this stage, I take the risk of acknowledging my inadequacy, my failures, and the spiritual shortcomings that spoil my life and bring many problems into it. I am also willing to listen to my friend if he wishes to share his mistakes with me. We pray for one another, comfort, forgive, repent, rejoice, and find freedom. At this stage, a proud heart can inflict an emotional wound very quickly, so few people venture into such depths of trust. Sometimes, when you open yourself in this way, you feel naked, and the last thing you want is to hear mockery and gossip directed at you. Yet I am prepared to accept even this, knowing that not everyone will accept me as I am. When teaching others, you always want to present those around you with an example of good conduct. The very idea of publicly admitting your mistakes fills you with horror because your influence and authority may fall to the level at which you are rejected and regarded as a failure and a mere talker. Yet the desire for a deep relationship moves me to take this risk as well.

6. Allowing someone to point out my mistakes. If I summon the courage to speak about my failures and shortcomings, I am already taking a great risk. But when I allow a friend to point out my mistakes, I take the enormous risk of being judged unfairly or exposing my heart to constructive criticism that may be inappropriate or biased. This may cause me pain or even influence my behavior and change my character.

This level of friendship is usually found within families. If communication takes place in a spirit of love and understanding, with mutual courtesy and respect, the union of

two hearts becomes very strong and joyful. But if one person decides to act in a way that violates the freedom of his or her life partner, the relationship breaks down. The resulting pain causes immeasurable harm to the soul and plunges it into many sorrows.

Respect for another person's freedom must be present at every stage of friendship. I may explore and test these boundaries, but I must not violate them. God forbids me to intrude into another person's life. Yet through my own openness, I can offer my friend a deeper relationship.

7. Having no secrets. Few people allow a friend to enter this stage of friendship. It may be reached in some families, and here rejection by a friend is equivalent to a catastrophe: the soul closes itself forever and to everyone. Casual friends are not admitted here, and even the closest people have no access to this private space. But this stage of friendship is open to God. It is here that I come to know the depth of His love, acceptance, and trust. God reveals His secrets to me, and I believe in Him and rely upon Him forever.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Psalm 111:3; Zechariah 9:16–17; Song of Solomon 5:16; Philippians 2:3; Mark 9:35; Proverbs 25:17; 27:10, 14; John 13:34.

## Business in Friendship

‘A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly’ (Proverbs 18:24). When the Lord fills the heart with love, it seeks to gain friends. As a result, people who were strangers become very dear because of the friendliness shown by one person.

Friendship does not stand still. It seeks points of connection through which it can reveal God’s character and become even stronger. When a person’s heart opens to a deeper relationship, you begin trusting your friend so much that you are even ready to undertake a dangerous mission with him.

When I have such relationships with many people, I create entire teams of friends with whom I can plan serious ventures and accomplish great things. Every idea intended to achieve growth and prosperity requires considerable financial expense and much personal time from the people who have gathered to carry it out.

Our world is very material, and it is structured accordingly. Spirituality alone is not enough to live in it. Money is necessary. If someone desires comfort or prosperity, he must have a higher income than most other people. Movies, advertising, and the lives of celebrities all seek to convince us that the chief purpose of life is material well-being, which helps a person build his own private paradise. Some yield to this temptation and make it their goal to attain the beautiful life they have grown accustomed to seeing in others.

Professional knowledge, the study and mastery of various sciences, and practical experience all give me an opportunity to find a well-paying job. But if I have enough courage, I eventually decide to open my own business and become the person in charge.

I decide to become an entrepreneur so that I will not work for someone else but will build my own business and receive a stable income. As I put this idea into practice or develop the business, I realize that I need partners and employees whom I can trust. My close friends are the first candidates who come to

mind. I remember the experiences of those who succeeded in bringing friendship into business and how smoothly the arrangement worked. I know that when I possess love and live at peace with everyone, I can succeed in any undertaking.

My dog is my very best friend. She loves me unconditionally, never judges me, and will never betray me. If necessary, she can give her life for me without hesitation and work for me day and night without asking for payment, expecting only food. Yet I do not think she would be suitable as a partner in my business. Common sense tells me that this creature was made for other purposes, despite all her love for me. With people, however, the matter is different. I may decide that if I have a friend after my own heart, he can also support me through his presence in my business and will never betray me.

Through the eyes of faith, I can already see us undertaking any project together and succeeding in everything because we love one another. Yet for some reason, the one thing I fail to consider is what talents and business qualities my loved one possesses. In the case of the dog, I exercise wisdom and do not plan any joint ventures. But a human being is not an animal; he is an intelligent creature, and it seems to me that if he is a true friend, he will support me. Better still, perhaps this friend is wealthy and can invest his resources in my business without expecting repayment, giving me everything from a pure heart, because love will cover everything.

And if my venture belongs to God—or if I call it God’s—then not only my friends but many other people can now support me without compensation, and in Eternity they will receive their reward.

Love can live in every human heart, and it works miracles in the lives of many people. But the presence of love and friendship does not make my friend talented in a particular field, and it is important to consider this before I offer him anything. A friend may possess hidden talents that emerge under certain conditions, so it is worth trusting him and trying to discover these abilities. Most often, however, friends fail to achieve the desired results in a shared business, and everything begins to

collapse. If a friend proves greedy for money or malicious, all the employees and customers suffer.

Business can reveal a person’s professional qualities, but it also exposes all his shortcomings. If my friend proves to be a fool or a lazy person, what am I to do with him? Parting ways may be the best decision, but it is very painful and tragic. This fire of trial burns up superficial relationships, but love helps preserve friendship.

Bringing friendship into business is one of the riskiest ventures, although risk is present in every undertaking. It is wise to be careful and attentive before offering anything. Every team contains both hardworking people and crafty idlers who survive through the efforts of their coworkers while claiming part of the success for themselves. But a wise supervisor recognizes this spirit and takes action.

Friendship implies trust. Someone may decide that if money is needed to develop a business, it should be borrowed from a friend—preferably a believing friend. My love for someone close to me may place me in a difficult position when he comes with such a request. Intellectually, I understand that business offers no guarantees and that my friend may fail and repay nothing, yet it is also very difficult to refuse support. How attractive the promises of repayment and future growth appear! But that is a separate subject.

I own a business myself and understand from personal experience what I am describing here. I have often had to make difficult decisions and dismiss friends and relatives in order to preserve the business, peace within the team, and our reputation, while also avoiding damage to our friendships. If any of you decide to bring friendship into your business, use common sense so that you do not lose your friends. But if you gain a friend through your business, this will bring blessings in many other areas as well.

Money, wealth, and power are severe tests that few believers pass successfully while maintaining a proper relationship with God. God does not permit all His children to open this chapter

of life, because He desires to protect their souls from destruction. Great possessions bring great temptations, and if wealth becomes an idol, my life collapses. I become unfit for Eternity even though I may be respected and well known in this world.

If I conduct business dishonestly and draw my friends into it, woe is me if I become a stumbling block to others. Yet love helps correct and restore many things. Perhaps God will command me to be poor while walking in integrity rather than rich with lying lips and foolish as well. In humility, I am ready to leave everything behind, but God allows me to continue without destroying my business, guiding me by the true spirit.

Woe is me if success in business leads me to exalt myself and consider myself great and wise. God can put a very quick end to my vanity, but it is better not to let myself reach that point.

Love helps me understand the most important spiritual matters and give them first place. It seeks to teach me many things so that I may keep my heart pure.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Proverbs 16:16; 18:24; 19:1; Exodus 31:1–6; 35:31–35; 36:1–6; Job 5:12–13; 32:7–9; 33:14–19; Joshua 1:7; Jeremiah 22:13; Ecclesiastes 5:12–19; Song of Solomon 8:7; Daniel 1:17; 2:21; Matthew 20:25–26; 1 Corinthians 1:25–29; Hebrews 13:20–21; Proverbs 14:4; 16:3, 8–9; 20:17; Jeremiah 17:10–11; Acts 5:38–39.

## Friendship in Business

While studying the previous lesson, you may have gained the impression that friendship should not be brought into business relationships and that undertaking joint ventures with friends is very dangerous. This raises the question: What are friends for? And how can I come to know a person better, discover his business qualities, and also see what I myself am made of?

When I ask God to teach me love and friendship, He gladly answers such prayers. He places the right spirit within me and writes His laws upon my heart. Then comes the testing of my new character.

Love needs to become firmly established. The spirit of friendliness must be passed through the fire. But fires differ. They may consist of my familiar ambitions and arrogance, my spiritual ignorance and lack of foresight, or the purposeful actions of God, Who brings difficult people into my friendships because He desires, through my love, to help them resolve the difficult questions of their lives. The important consideration is Who my Teacher is and whether I am a disciple of Jesus in this process.

God knows what to do with clay that can still be reshaped. He takes me like a piece of incomprehensible, shapeless material and crumbles me into a vessel filled with the water of the Holy Spirit. Then He removes His shoes and begins treading me with His bare feet. Many parts of my soul immediately soften and yield to His influence, while others remain hard and hurt the feet of the Heavenly Craftsman. But the Lord has dealt with worse material than this. Although my hardness and stubbornness cause Him pain, they present no problem for Him. Sometimes He plunges His loving hands into the slurry of softened material and removes the hard pieces of my stubbornness to determine whether they are my stony heart. If so, the Lord replaces it with a heart of flesh. Then He returns everything to the common mass. When the mixture is ready, I am placed upon the potter’s wheel, and through the hands of Jesus, God’s creative thought begins bringing the greatest and

most unattainable ideas to life within me. My character assumes the particular form into which the Lord plans to pour His water of life each day.

But while the vessel is still unbaked, there can be no question of holding any water.

And now I have been formed. I like the prospect of my future responsibilities and begin dreaming of wonderful fellowship among the rest of God's vessels. I am placed beneath the Sun of righteousness so that I may grow strong and become established in His rays. I feel ready for any victory or heroic deed for Christ. I long to receive anything into myself. But the Wise Craftsman shows me a blazing furnace and informs me that this is the next stage of my development.

Fear of the pain of trial paralyzes me, but the Lord assures me that He is with me and will not leave me. He therefore places me gently into the burning furnace. The flames heat me all the way through, removing foreign impurities and drying everything within me. I see nothing but intense fire, yet it does not harm me or destroy the shape of my character. It makes my character strong.

The fiery furnace is left behind, and I joyfully remember the experience and tell other people about it. They look at me, examine me with their eyes, and glorify God for such a work of art.

Then the Lord begins filling me with various substances that He periodically desires to cook, boil, melt down, or roast in a hot furnace. Sometimes I recognize among these ingredients the expectations of my friends, who entrust me with their secrets and make use of my talents. Although the fire of God's trials does not harm me and the flame will not scorch me with fatal consequences, I do not always enter the fiery furnace willingly. Sometimes the Lord allows wicked people to bind me and cast me into it by order of the rulers of this world. These kings command that the furnace be heated seven times hotter than usual, and I have nowhere to escape. I understand that this world is incapable of acting differently.

We have been given to one another so that we may find one another and gain one another for life. I will never discover a person as though he were a new planet if I keep him at a distance and do not allow him to participate in my ventures. Every undertaking passes through the fire of trials, and God does not even need to invent them. They surround us and need only be permitted. Every relationship with friends will inevitably enter the purifying flame. If I do not allow this fire to pass through our fellowship, the relationship will remain superficial and become soft like an unbaked clay pitcher into which water is poured.

Gaining friends in business creates the strongest kind of structure. Together we pass through every kind of trial. Together we discover new possibilities within one another and begin trusting each other more and more. We meet each new difficulty with the joy of victors, knowing that it will not break our relationship but only strengthen it.

Building a business with those who do not share your faith in Jesus is like trying to mix clay with iron and fashion something worthwhile from it. Such a structure will not withstand the fire or pass the test. The iron will always pull me toward the magnets of temptation, and I will continually have to explain and prove to it that we must obey God’s law and not defile our vessel with anything unclean. But iron cannot understand this. It feels the pull of the magnets and cannot resist them. Woe is me if I become so thoroughly mixed with this iron that I refuse to reject its invitations to have fun or become involved in yet another reckless venture. The fire of trial will burn out all foreign impurities and render me unfit for any good purpose. My life may be hopelessly shattered.

It is also worth noting that starting a family is a business venture of its own. Yet you should not drag an appealing friend into this undertaking. It is better to find that person within an existing endeavor and, after testing his or her true feelings and thoughts, build something together.

The family is the most important enterprise ever entrusted to a human being. If I desire to build something beautiful and

strong, I must approach it seriously. I can part with a business partner, change occupations, or bring everything to a halt, but I cannot run away from my spouse. My spouse is my own flesh. Whether this becomes something of one substance or something mixed with another is for me to decide, seeing with my own eyes and understanding with my heart. If my candidate for this family enterprise professes the same faith but carries foreign impurities within his or her vessel, they will become part of our shared home and destroy us from within. The Lord is able to correct even this, but it is better for both people to address it before marriage than within marriage; otherwise, this union may be rejected forever.

I know of cases in which my friends worked together in medical missionary enterprises, observed one another, and allowed God to temper them through various trials. After passing through many difficulties, they decided to establish a shared enterprise, knowing what kind of person the other was. The result is something strong.

I also know people who saw each other for the first time, smiled, and decided to begin a shared enterprise without ever understanding who the other person truly was. They later experienced bitter disappointment and shattered their lives. A definite pattern can be seen in all this.

But agape love can correct everything.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Proverbs 15:22; 16:3; 20:18; 1 Corinthians 3:13–15; Ezekiel 36:25–28; 1 Peter 1:6–9; 4:12; Job 10:8–12; Isaiah 29:15–16; 45:9–12; 64:8; Jeremiah 18:2–10; Daniel 2:33–34, 41–43; 3:19–20; Romans 9:20–21; 2 Timothy 2:19–21; 2 Corinthians 6:14–18; Amos 3:3; Colossians 3:18; Deuteronomy 7:3–4; Ezra 9:12; Ecclesiastes 5:5.

## You and I

Our fast-paced age is rapidly bringing us toward the final outcome of last-day events. The world also understands that something utterly incomprehensible is happening across the globe and will bring us into circumstances that absolutely no one anticipates except those who are waiting for Christ.

Every nation, as though following the same template, is acting out one common scenario of taking measures and restricting freedoms in the struggle against an invisible evil. If terrorism was once the world's chief enemy, a virus has now been added to it. What an interesting confrontation! According to Bible prophecy, we who seek oil for our lamps in order to be a light to those who will kill us will become the world's next enemies.

What a remarkable situation. The world is preparing everything to kill me, while I dream of having enough time to save someone else from this world so that these people may live forever. Although I cannot help everyone, if even one person's life becomes better and Eternal Life is born within him through faith in Jesus, this will be God's greatest work, extending throughout Eternity.

Amid all these preparations for the end, one particular feature can be traced: the relationship between you and me.

All these lessons are good in themselves, but their essence comes down to this: someday you and I will meet so that we may personally discover that the School of Agape Love also has a practical part to its curriculum. We will begin putting all the principles we have studied into practice and recognizing the presence of love within them.

I am the one writing or reading these lines, and you are the one who will allow me into your life in order to understand how the agape love received from God can be passed on to another person.

Without you, my friend, love cannot be love. It has nothing from which to be reflected. It will travel toward you endlessly until it

reaches the surface of your soul and reflects whatever appears within its spectrum of colors.

I cannot say very much about myself, but I am who I am, and so far I do not have another self like me. I possess outward ways of expressing myself, inward qualities of the soul, and spiritual potential that I preserve for you. But I cannot give you all of this immediately and without reservation, because I do not know who you are in your knowledge and acceptance of me. Yet I know myself very well and understand certain qualities of which no one else is even aware.

You are a completely unpredictable person. I may have known you for a very long time and known you very well, or I may know you without knowing you at all. You may enter my life merely to pass through it and leave forever without even leaving a trace. Or you may drop anchor and build a house nearby so that you can always remain close.

You may be kind, evil, indifferent, interesting, helpful, critical, friendly or unfriendly—anything at all—and I do not plan to remake you. But your unique quality of being yourself belongs exclusively to you.

Yet you are extremely important and interesting to me. God did not create me for loneliness, but for you. I know that you have the same purpose. We need only find one another, unite in friendship, and bind it all together with love. I can try to do this alone, but without you this undertaking will not stand.

My knowledge of God’s love—of its power and strength—will help me give you hope and confidence in the real me, a faithful person who is close to you. If you accept my efforts and give me reason to place my hope in you, then with all the fullness of my abilities, I will be able to shower you with my modest proposals for making your life better and more interesting.

The possibility that you possess similar knowledge of love and are searching for me in order to love me is very small. Yet I am the one searching for you, and I can give you more than you imagine. Although I desire to receive such responses, I cannot count on them, or my life may become one continual

disappointment. But you have the right to receive from me what I possess. And I possess love. I do not produce it; I receive it from God in order to give it away. There is no greater joy for me than seeing and understanding that this love has been accepted, that someone needs it, and that someone desires it.

When I have an opportunity to share myself and give my whole self through it, I do so joyfully, expecting to receive you in return. You are the answer to my 'I,' so that we may become 'we.'

But you are free, and so am I. We may attend the same church for years, greet each other politely, help one another, and sometimes even visit on special occasions, yet remain strangers. If I move away, you may not even call to learn how I am doing.

But I am open to friendship. The windows and doors of my soul are open so that anyone who desires may enter. Although I have been taught to be cautious and always try to understand what casual visitors need, I am not so closed off that I must be avoided.

It is difficult for me to expect or demand openness from you. It must arise within you on its own. I cannot even ask you to notice me and understand that for now I am yours conditionally, but I am capable of becoming yours unconditionally. I am what love is making me, and love needs you. It knows that many people do not believe in the theory of love and demand actions. Therefore, it desires to come in person and accomplish a great work by joining you and me in one friendship, developing and strengthening it, and carrying it into Eternity.

My desire to draw near to you is constant. Even when I am tired, extremely busy, or occupied with certain matters, do not be afraid. This is not a reason for me to reject you forever. It may simply be a temporary experience of dealing with everyday matters that I am trying to resolve without you.

I enjoy dreaming about you and wondering how our friendship will develop. I simply rejoice in everything I will discover within you when your heart sees a friend in me and opens to meet me,

granting access to the countless treasures hidden in the depths of your untamed soul.

You are the person I can take with me into Eternity if your faith gives you the right to this Eternal Life. Imagine it: throughout Eternity, we will be able to continue discovering one another and sharing our knowledge with each other, so that through the unending ages of eternal life we may glorify God for how wonderfully we are made!

Although I am who I am and there is only one of me on the entire planet, there are very many of you. You are everywhere. I need only stop you, catch your attention, awaken your interest, and wait to see what you will do with me. I want to be yours not only for resolving temporary tasks and paying current bills, but as someone who has become part of your friendship and your life.

Do not think that I am now trying to start a family. That is a special subject, and there is room there for only two selfish people—her and me; a third would be one too many. But you are the one who surrounds me on every side and will never be unnecessary. I will never tell you that my heart is overflowing with friends and that there is simply no place in it for you. You do not need to think so poorly of me; that is not who I am.

Do you recognize yourself in this lesson? Do you believe that it was written personally for you, my friend? You did not ask me to say these things or force me to open my heart. I made this decision myself because my love desires to do something for you. You deserve this simply because you are a human being. I know that you will read this, smile, read it once more, and forget it like a good fairy tale for adults. But I have written the truth.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Psalm 119:61, 95, 165; Proverbs 10:12; Romans 5:5; 8:38–39; 12:9; 13:8–10; John 13:34–35; 15:12; Mark 12:30–31; Ephesians 4:15; 1 Corinthians 10:24; 16:14; Jude 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:7; Matthew 5:44; Colossians 3:14; 1 Peter 4:8; 2 Thessalonians 3:5; 1 John 4:7–8, 20–21; 2 Corinthians 13:11.

## How Difficult Is It to Love One Another?

What do you hear when someone tells you that it is easier to love an enemy than a friend, and that loving one another is difficult? I think many of you understand this statement in exactly the opposite way. In a certain sense, both sides are right. Without love present in the heart, loving anyone requires an incredible effort of the will, which must maintain within me the image of a good person.

But love exists, and through me it desires to love everyone whose life touches mine.

Difficult does not mean impossible. It means that the complexity of the interaction between what is human and Heavenly within me and what is human within my opponent is far more extensive and difficult than I imagine.

Let us consider an example.

The Peugeot automobile company has a plant that manufactures a class A automobile and a factory that produces bicycles. These products have the same owner and carry the same brand name. A new car rolls off the assembly line every six minutes, while a new bicycle is produced every ten minutes. Judging by these figures, one might conclude that automobiles are easier to assemble. But this is only a superficial view.

Assembling one automobile requires approximately sixteen thousand components, some of which consist of many different connections and systems. If even one item is missing, the entire production line stops until the component is delivered and installed in its proper place.

A bicycle consists of twenty-seven main parts, each of which may contain as many as twenty components. When parts are missing, bicycle assembly does not stop. The delayed mechanism is installed later on the unfinished bicycles.

All these vehicles undergo a technical inspection and are then approved for sale and use.

Now tell me, which is more difficult to bring to market: an automobile or a bicycle? When logistics, production, and sales are properly organized, both products sell like hotcakes. Yet the difference in the complexity of their construction is visible to the naked eye, even though they carry the same company name.

Love has one Owner—the One Who is Love. By offering Himself to everyone who desires Him, the Lord gives us a finished product that successfully interacts with our human nature and perception. We tend to claim this quality of God's character as our own without even considering how complex its interconnected components are.

Consider, for example, the brain's response to an insulting word directed at me. The ear hears particular sound waves that pass through the eardrum and are transformed into an electrical signal. This signal, in turn, passes through various filters of identification and conversion into the brain's information center. There, what was said is stored in my memory together with the time and source. The information is then sent to my perception, where the will processes the received impulses and decides what I should do with what I have heard, guided by the way I am accustomed and conditioned to respond. All this occurs much faster than I have described it. If my eyes see the person speaking, they also transmit his image through their own channels together with his words. His image is superimposed upon the sounds he produces, and everything is sent to the brain's computer for technical and emotional processing.

If we are eating lunch during the conversation, taste, smell, and the sensation of what I am holding in my hands are added to the sounds and images. Even the air temperature leaves its mark upon the transmission of all these signals to the brain.

How complex is the mechanism by which we perceive the world? Yet how wonderfully and rapidly it works! We do not even think about what is taking place.

When the Lord created our world, He built from the simple to the complex, completing creation by bringing woman into the world. Everything came from the same hands, but not everything was equally complex.

When Jesus commanded people to love their enemies, He was speaking to a multitude of men and women of different ages who might not even have known God. But when He gave the commandment to love one another, He spoke it to a chosen circle of friends who, for three and a half years, had received the highest education in the entire Universe. Yet when the new commandment was proclaimed, the disciples' minds were not prepared to hear it. Jesus therefore had to give three commandments about loving one another, all of which lead to the same final result: I love my friend, and my friend loves me.

What is difficult about that?

Love for an enemy implies a one-sided attitude toward an opponent, which I may reproduce as I see fit, calling even something that is not love by that name. But if I receive love from the heart of God, it loves my enemy genuinely through me, expecting nothing in return and imposing no mutual obligations.

Love for one another is mutual, and nothing false will work here. The more deeply I understand the principles of love, the more complex my attitude toward my friend becomes. I direct such intricate combinations of my will, feelings, and reason toward him that only the Lord can properly unite them within me so they will be genuine. If emotional coloring, my worldview, my distinctive qualities, tastes, and habits are also added, the mechanism of transmitting and receiving becomes so complex that only the equally loving heart of a friend can accept, understand, and properly absorb it while returning a no less complex combination of personal attitudes and experiences in response to mine.

Our love for one another does not stand still but progresses, urging us to devise new ways and ideas for sharing ourselves with a friend while expecting a corresponding variety in return.

When I think about my friend’s happiness, I become so completely immersed in this complex process of reflection and decision-making that only God, seeing my diligence, can help me formulate through words and actions the final result of my discoveries in a language my friend understands. All this takes place within fractions of a second while incorporating the entire experience of my years of life and my victories in love and happiness.

For an enemy, it is enough to give a minimum of love without considering its variety. Yet even this minimum must be received from above; otherwise, it will appear false, or the carnal nature will come to assist.

But a minimum will not work in loving one another. I myself will quickly understand that a friendship must grow and develop, creating a variety of mutual love and joy. If this growth occurs only within me, my love, receiving no response from my friend, may stop developing further. It may conclude that it has reached its culmination and that there is no reason to complicate the relationship with additional variety.

But this is wrong. Mutual love must not become a stagnant swamp. It should feed its springs from the Creator of love, giving life-giving water to a friend’s loving heart.

I can prepare myself to love my friend, but I cannot force him to respond in the same way. He must decide this for himself, passing through the most complex process of melting down his own self and presenting to me the finished product of his desire to love me unconditionally and to do so always.

This lesson may describe the process of loving one another in a way that is far more complex and lengthy than necessary, but I believe true love will make it much simpler.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Colossians 3:14; Psalm 139:14; Ephesians 4:11–16; Isaiah 55:8–9; Matthew 5:44–48; 11:29–30; John 13:34–35; 15:12–13, 17–19; 2 Peter 3:15–16; Matthew 7:13–14; Proverbs 1:23–33; Revelation 3:18.

## Me or My Attitude?

What do you hear when I tell you that I love chicken? Knowing that I am a vegetarian, some of you may decide to ask what exactly I mean by such a statement. Questions like this cause me to consider the meaning of my love for this animal. Do I truly love the chicken, or do I love the taste of its meat and the aroma of roasted flesh coming from a hot oven? Whenever I pass the meat section, I am always amused by pictures of smiling animals on packages of sausage. It creates the impression that their only dream is to be chopped up for discerning gourmets. Yet we become accustomed to such expressions and understand their culinary meaning. Then, after using expressions like these, we declare that we love one another. This kind of love makes a person feel uneasy. It makes me want to ask, 'In what kind of package do you love me best?' But then I would most likely be the one who was not understood.

If we analyze our relationships with one another and look into their depths, we can understand that in many cases they are conditioned by our behavior or by what we do for each other. This is precisely what we fall in love with.

I really like teddy bears. They are so soft and fluffy. It is pleasant to press an unshaven cheek against them and smell their clean fur. They never bite me or complain when I intrude into their lives and begin dragging them across the floor by one leg or carrying them beneath my arm. But I imagine what would happen if this teddy bear were alive. I think I would have to reconsider my behavior and become more careful and considerate. Although it is an animal, it has an unpredictable nature and can be very dangerous.

If I tell you that I love a living bear cub, you will not ask what I mean, because eating bears is not customary in our society. This means that I care for this creature, create favorable living conditions for it, choose the proper food, spend time with it, show it affection if it permits me, and do many other things to which love moves me. Perhaps this little bear will begin

responding to me with affection and will not regard me as a steak for its next breakfast. Even if it has nothing to eat, I will most likely not appear in its plans as a desirable lunch.

What do you hear when I say that I love you, my friend? You understand that I am not a cannibal, so this expression does not alarm you. Yet far from everyone considers what kind of love is being discussed.

Do I truly love you? Or do I love your kind attitude toward me? What tells you about my love? How can you understand how deep it is and toward whom it is directed?

God permits trials in every relationship to reveal whether it is superficial or deep. Heaven is not opposed to our being kind to one another and to the entire world. But kind treatment may be produced by the circumstances of life and does not necessarily testify to mutual love.

When I tell my friend that I love him, I understand what I mean. These are not empty words but the expression of an attitude founded upon a deep principle and drawing its strength from the Source of Eternal Love. If I do not intend anything like this, I will find another word or remain silent. I understand what I am dealing with, the influence words of love exert, and the consequences they bring into my life.

God, Who endows me with His love, expects thoughtful conduct from me in this area. He knows how much love I withdraw from the Heavenly bank. It gives Him great pleasure to see His agape leave Heaven forever in a rushing stream, pass through my heart, and pour into the lives of those around me in the form of modest words of love, small expressions of attention, and acts of faith that few people notice or value. But I love, and I understand what I am doing.

Knowing what agape toward you means, I am prepared for the testing of my love. I ask the Lord for an abundance of it so that I may endure any attack and preserve the right spirit and the right attitude, consistent with the path of love I have chosen.

This is how I understand it: if I have decided to love someone and be his friend, it is forever. Although I am humanly weak, I have the Lord, Who strengthens me in such decisions and places His seal of approval upon them as I become established in them. Without Him, all my declarations would be as sounding brass. The only thing I can boast about is knowing how generous the Lord is in giving His love when He is asked for it. He does not hesitate to give all Heaven to help me, if only I will not cease loving the person I have decided to love.

But love is not the enslavement of the will for the gratification of the person you love. It is the right attitude at all times, taking my abilities and desires into account. Mutual freedom is welcomed in love.

And what do I hear when someone says that he loves me? When I understand what Love is and what it is not, observing the development of a relationship can be very interesting. I do not have a rule requiring me to rebuke anyone. I rejoice in every expression of kindness toward me. But through practice, my heart has been trained to distinguish the Heavenly from the earthly. Although I cannot read the thoughts or true motives of a person who loves me, I still desire him, for his own sake, to understand whom or what he loves.

I have seen the trials of relationships sift many decisions and declarations. A friend must come to understand that he needs to stand upon principle in his decision to love, or else determine what the agape God desires to see within us truly is.

Loving one another is the most attainable undertaking in our relationships, but it depends upon our close connection with God. He is the One Who gives us this agape and teaches us how to use it in our relationships with one another. Without Him, nothing will succeed. Yet without our consent, He will not force us to love one another. At best, we will come to love the relationship between us.

I understand what it means to love you, my friend, and I approach this with great responsibility. But when you love me, do you understand whom you love? I am open to this love and

will not create obstacles. I will give my whole self, but only you can decide whether you need me. I do not begrudge giving you my attitude, which many people appreciate, but I want to become yours forever and, together with myself, give you my entire attitude as well. Yet I will not dissolve into you. I will remain myself, retaining my freedom to choose how I behave in this love while also respecting your freedom.

And what does God hear when I tell Him that I love Him? He hears what I mean, not merely what I say. He cannot be deceived. Yet He teaches me to love genuinely and is not discouraged by my initial hypocrisy. He leads me toward true values, removing everything temporary and carnal.

In our human love for one another, the Lord sees how we love Him as well, and He does not require more from us than we are capable of giving.

His commandment concerning mutual love carries within itself the power and promise that this is possible if we decide to do it and learn how, remaining patient with the mistakes of others.

I do not object, my friend, if your love for my attitude develops into love for me. This is the essence of our education: that we love one another rather than our relationships. And this is possible.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Deuteronomy 6:4–6; 1 Corinthians 13:1–3; 1 Peter 1:22; John 13:34–35; Mark 7:9; John 15:9–14, 17–19; 21:15–17; Matthew 7:21–23; 15:7–9; Deuteronomy 10:12–13; Genesis 25:28; 29:30–35.

## The Beauty of Loving One Another

Christ's greatest desire is to save me from the power of sin and reveal His beautiful character to me. The Plan of Salvation is therefore intended to show me the image of God and then restore it within me. God's love aims not only to help me understand that I am loved, but also to make me loving.

No matter how many of us there may be, every appeal from God applies to me personally and is directed specifically to my heart in order to save and transform me. The Lord takes every quality of my character into account. He chooses for my heart the melody that harmonizes with the strings of my soul and reveals to my mind the truths it is capable of receiving and digesting. As a result, two hearts—mine and God's—are joined so that within this union they may allow Heavenly principles to form within me the thought patterns of a righteous person.

My faith, my discoveries, my blessings, and my revelations from above—all these form within my mind a special understanding of Jesus, and He becomes my dear and closest Friend. I begin to live, move, and think by Him. His presence is revealed in every deed and word of mine.

The presence of Christ in the life of each of us makes the soul infinitely beautiful. When explored deeply, it uncovers within us an inexhaustible potential for amazing discoveries and possibilities. These may manifest themselves in difficult trials, but they are revealed only in the light of unconditional love.

Each of us is an unexplored planet within whose depths Jesus has placed endless resources of abundant blessings. So that we might uncover this most precious potential in at least one person, the Creator designed the family. Within it, husband and wife can spend an endless amount of time discovering one another and, through mutual love, bringing to the surface of their relationship the countless treasures of the human heart that await their treasure hunter. Upon all this wealth of the soul rests God's seal as the True Owner, Who so generously rewards every explorer.

But the family is a very limited unit of society, and not all the blessings discovered within its boundaries become the common possession of others. If both hearts in a family are closed because of harsh treatment, faultfinding, and insults, no discoveries can take place. Yet a soul filled with Jesus languishes and, like a volcano, longs to pour its depths outward.

Who will help wounded hearts uncover the treasures of the soul that have been placed and formed within them? Who will dare to draw from someone else's spouse the priceless abilities of cheerfulness, friendliness, and love? Who will venture beyond the boundaries of the family and give unconditional agape to a wounded heart? Only Jesus can do this.

Seeing how difficult it would become for us to live in the last days and how many broken hearts would perish from loneliness within their families and among their fellow believers, the Lord established a new order of relationships and placed it within the framework of God's law. We were given a new Eternal commandment: that we love one another.

The angels were astonished by this decision of God—the decision to reveal the mystery of Eternal Life to humanity and give human beings the most powerful weapon in the entire Universe.

No limitations were placed upon loving one another. Instead, clear markers and qualities of this love were declared, testifying to the personal presence of Christ in the lives of people who love one another.

Mortal human beings can now receive the most powerful force in the Universe—agape. Love is medicine for those who are sick in soul and spirit, a delicacy for connoisseurs, protection for the persecuted, a weapon for those under attack, joy for the deprived, light for those imprisoned in darkness, and the best way out of every lukewarm condition.

Loving one another means that I agree to allow another person to enter the depths of my heart and that he agrees to let me do the same with him. My friend can make discoveries within me

and wholeheartedly share his findings and revelations with me, marveling at what a valuable treasure the Lord has entrusted to him in the person of a friend. It is an opportunity throughout earthly life and endless life to mine precious resources for our shared joy and tell your friend how greatly the treasures of his soul have enriched you.

Words of love exchanged with a beloved and loving friend are closely intertwined with God’s will that this love be genuine. When human beings consent to obey God’s commandment, the Lord Himself is present in our fellowship. Through our knowledge of one another, He reveals Himself and comes to know us.

The depth of this commandment to love one another can be understood only by keeping it together, moving solely toward one another, and entering the depths of an open soul and a heart flung wide.

I am also greatly encouraged that this commandment of God entered the message to Laodicea and became a prophetic message for God’s people and a condition for leaving the lukewarm state. It is surprising that the merchandise is not given free of charge. Yet when I learn what I must use as payment, and what Jesus desires to receive in exchange for His goods and how He desires to receive it, I am amazed by God’s wisdom and modesty in this matter.

The Lord does not merely command us to love one another. He also makes it a condition for a deeper relationship with Himself, showing us that this is the path of an overcomer.

Imagine a wealthy man who decides to pay all your expenses for the benefit of your friends on the condition that you come to him every day to receive another sum of money and share with the banker your joy over what you were able to accomplish with the funds you previously received. Does that sound appealing? This is exactly how it is.

The question arises: ‘Where does all this take place? Where are the people described in this lesson?’ The answer comes: ‘All of it is within you, my friend—within the power of your decision

and the source of your relationship with Jesus. You are the master of your will, and even God takes your decisions into account.'

What could be better or more interesting than allowing your friend to discover you while you explore the depths of his heart? If our families followed this principle, we would not even know what divorce or adultery was. Why betray the person who enriches you so abundantly? Is it wise to kill the hen that lays the golden eggs?

The Lord opens these endless sources of blessing to us in His commandment to love and in His invitation to perfect this love by entering into a transaction with Him.

Heaven watches with interest as everyone who heeds the counsel of Jesus becomes rich through one another, purchasing love in order to give it away, with the active participation and assistance of the Three Heavenly Powers.

What a privilege Laodicea has—to receive power from above for love, become rich with this Heavenly gold, form one's character, acquire wisdom, and dine with Jesus every day!

Will the Lord personally know His regular customers? Will He distinguish these people from all others? He taught that even the world would know that they are His disciples. Shall we then show those around us the full beauty of God's commandment and the depth of the Laodicean message within our lives? Let them follow our example. We will love one another and, as we enter the depths of this love, make amazing discoveries that we can carry into Eternity so that there we may continue this work without end. But we must begin here and now, before it is too late.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Acts 19:18; 1 Peter 1:22; 2:17; 1 Corinthians 13:1–3; John 13:34–35; 14:12–16; 15:12–13, 17–19; Revelation 3:18–20; Philippians 1:6–10; Ephesians 5:14–33; Romans 10:10; 13:8–10; 2 Corinthians 4:1–5; 1 John 1:7–10.

## Knowing Within Knowing

The most terrifying words—those that all Christians desire least to hear—are: ‘I know you not!’ (Matthew 7:23; 25:12). These words will be spoken not to unbelievers, pagans, or atheists, but to those who bore God’s name, performed important works, opposed evil spirits, and worked great miracles.

During one period of my life, I had close fellowship with people who were doing God’s work and experiencing success and evident blessings in it. Yet alongside all this, there was a strange spirit of criticism toward those who thought and lived differently. It seemed that only two opinions existed: theirs and the wrong one. We had to part quietly. I could not reconcile these two opposing realities until the Lord helped me understand a simple truth: deeds must be separated from people. God does not forbid evil people to perform good deeds or good people to commit evil. But He judges every deed justly, evaluating it according to the measure of love invested in it.

Pride or self-exaltation arising from success in God’s work is repulsive to God.

Jesus warned His followers that not everyone who accomplishes something in His name will be received by Him into the Eternal Kingdom. The Lord explained this by saying that He does not know those people. How can this be? What does it mean? A person cannot cast out demons, work miracles, or prophesy by his own power. And if we examine the matter, God knows all of us by name and is always with us from the moment of conception until death. How, then, can He say that He does not know us?

Let me give an example and ask a question: ‘Which of you knows me personally?’ I think some readers have seen me and spoken with me. Let me ask it differently: ‘Who knows me as a close friend?’ Here you will not be able to answer positively, because I know all my close friends and can set my own perspective against your answer. Although I am open to friendship with everyone, not everyone accepts this offer.

I can tell you that Jesus is my closest Friend, that I have no one better than Him, that I live with Him in perfect harmony, and that I enjoy other benefits from this relationship. As you listen, you cannot contradict me because you do not know how to verify it. Against the background of my beautiful friendship with God, your own relationship may appear worthless to you. Unfortunately, we have a tendency to compare one thing with another.

But how does Jesus evaluate my declarations? He certainly knows what kind of friends we truly are. If He says that He does not know me, He will be right, and I will prove to be a liar.

Let us examine what ‘I know you not’ means.

The Lord knows us better than anyone. He knows what we are made of, our thoughts, our past, and our future. He has books in which everything concerning us is recorded. But as I study the Bible, I also notice that the Lord calls me to know Him as a Friend, as a Husband, and as a Savior. He longs for a closer relationship with me in which He desires to reveal Himself.

Even Eternal Life is defined by knowing God and Jesus Christ, Whom He sent (John 17:3). This knowledge is distinctive because it implies deep comprehension, detailed exploration, a passionate desire to understand God’s character, and entrance into a personal, close, mutual relationship. There can be no casual knowledge here. Either this relationship exists, or it does not.

But God is invisible, and at times it is difficult to understand whether I am coming to know Him and whether He is coming to know me.

We can come to know God through nature, through reading the Bible, and through studying the life of Christ. He will reveal Himself to us everywhere. But how can I see whether I love Him and whether He knows me?

Jesus gave us the commandment to love one another. It entered the New Covenant and took effect at the time of Christ’s death. The Lord Himself is present within this command. He desires to

know us personally in our relationship with Him. He identifies Himself with every human being and presents Himself in the person of each of us. A believer is God's direct representative to this world. The Lord does not always reveal Himself to me in prayer, and I cannot always understand whether I have opened myself to Him. But our relationships with our friends in the faith reveal very clearly how close and friendly we are. Jesus taught that others would determine whether we are His disciples by our relationships of love (John 13:35). If we have fellowship with one another, we walk in the light, and the blood of Christ cleanses us from every sin.

God cannot accept my love for Him if I hate my brother in the faith at the same time.

Jesus desires to know me through my relationships with my friends. At the same time, He longs to know my friends through my love for them. In loving one another, we open our hearts so widely that we can spend an endless amount of time coming to know each other, discovering the many benefits of this process, and marveling at the treasures of the soul within each of us that do not lie upon the surface.

The depths of what we can reveal to one another rest beneath the reliable protection of human will and choice and remain inaccessible even to God without my personal permission. Unconditional, sincere love can easily open these doors and bring into the light of our relationship things that we do not even know about ourselves. When I give a friend the opportunity to know me and enter more deeply into my inner world, through this I also open my heart to God. It becomes easy for me to admit Him into my soul as well and share with Him the mysteries of how my inner world is arranged.

Revealing myself must not become indecent exposure. If I allow a close friend into my home, this does not mean that I may undress before him. Certain intimate areas must always remain within every heart that can be opened only to God, one's spouse, or one's physician.

Many believers will be surprised when they claim that the Lord belongs to them, and He answers that they served Him in the person of those around them.

My love for my friend and my friend's love for me also contain God's plan for preparation for the final events. In the message to Laodicea, I am offered love under the symbol of gold—love that must be shown to those around me and to my friends. Love for a friend implies a relationship with that friend, and a relationship of love implies knowing one another. We do not necessarily need agape in order to become acquainted. We may be polite and cheerful and may even risk opening ourselves to another person, hoping he will not cause pain. But then we step upon the same rake again and close ourselves forever. Agape, however, does no harm to another person. It is very careful and guards the secret of another heart, yet it also knows how to share wisely with others the beauty of the friend who has opened himself, doing so in a way that benefits him.

Love passes through trials, and in this fire it is cleansed from unnecessary impurities and dirt. By loving one another, we allow God to regenerate our hearts, make us sensitive, and place His hand upon our relationships, bringing His Spirit into them. Where love is, God is there. He will never leave us to love one another without Him. He will not give us Himself apart from Himself. By opening my heart to love, I give God authority to know me, and He allows me to know His name.

It saddens me to listen to those who say that they have known God but do not possess God's love. I do not claim their love for myself, but the spirit of love is visible to everyone.

Bible Verses for Reflection

John 17:3; 1 John 1:6–7; Psalm 91:14–16; 1 Corinthians 2:16; 13:1–8; Matthew 5:14–16; 7:13–27; 25:11–13, 31–46; Luke 13:24–30; 2 Timothy 2:19; Ephesians 2:10; John 13:34–35; 16:2–3; 1 John 2:3–4, 13; 4:7–21.

## Inner Joy

When the fire of love burns within the heart, you always want to share it. When you understand how many blessings love brings into life, an irresistible desire arises to tell people about it, persuade them to enter this path, and describe the wonderful experiences agape brings. After all, the only thing better than love is the love you receive for new victories and blessings. I cannot live upon the experiences of former days. I always need fresh love seasoned with Heavenly salt.

But the problem is that I have already grown in love. I know what it is, how it works within me, and how I love. Yet to the listener with whom I am trying to share my happiness, I may seem like a foreigner attempting to teach higher mathematics in an unfamiliar language.

When I tell those around me about love, I watch their interest in the subject very carefully. As a friend, I expect my joy and delight to be transmitted to my listeners and for them to experience a special blessing from such light. But then I remember that growth in love has its own principles and timing, which I cannot accelerate. I must be patient and continue sowing the seed.

The Lord leads me onward into new depths of love and prompts me to write them down so that readers may understand where they are going and know what happiness awaits them as they come to know agape and develop it within their minds.

The mind does not comprehend the depth of revelations immediately. An elementary school student cannot solve problems in higher mathematics, but he moves confidently toward that ability, growing from one solution to the next.

The language of love is understood by everyone, and everyone experiences it. But the depth of knowledge is revealed only by God at the time the Lord has appointed for each diligent student.

Loving one another contains something that cannot be described in words but can be experienced. We become God's blessing to one another, enriching each other without bringing sorrow with us. The Heavenly gold of love can adorn both my life and my friend's life. I become rich in love when I withdraw it from the Heavenly bank in order to give it away and enrich my friend with it. He is enriched by my loving attitude toward him, storing within his heart my attention, kind words, joy that I am present in his life, and my delight in him. He enjoys the wonderful touch of God's agape as it passes through my heart, carrying a part of me so that it may become a part of him.

In response to such an attitude, my friend does the same. He connects to Heaven's endless resources in order to enrich the storehouses of my soul with his heartfelt affection, tenderness, the healing balm of gentle words, and Heavenly tones, assuring me that my love has found a response within his soul and has been accepted forever into his mind.

Then we share with one another the very wealth we have received from each other, each trying to prove to his friend that the friend is better than he is and is the most wonderful person in the world. Through this, each of us becomes even richer.

All this leads us, out of the abundance of love within our hearts, to begin enriching our dear Savior through joyful exclamations, inspired prayers of thanksgiving, uplifting songs, and a feeling of jubilation over the friend we have been given. I believe Jesus takes great pleasure in becoming rich through our love for one another. He joyfully helps us understand that this is only the beginning of eternal relationships that will continue developing and deepening without end, bringing even greater joy.

If loving one another can already fill us with delight and happiness now, I can only imagine what all this will be like in Eternity!

I am simply describing the experience in which I live. I know with certainty that if I was able to attain it, you can as well.

If relationships like these are present within your family, you are rightly the happiest of families. But remember that the

family cannot be the foundation or building material of happiness, because death may separate you unexpectedly.

But if love is present, it will adorn every relationship and even true happiness founded upon Christ.

The Lord expects this boundless spirit of loving one another not to restrict us to only one friend or spouse. Rather, within the boundaries of God's law and Christian ethics, this quality of the soul should belong to all my friends.

A friend's unconditional love frees my mind from every kind of stereotype, removes the barriers of the heart, and opens access to treasures within my soul of which even I am unaware.

The Lord asks me to call unto Him, and He will show me great and mighty things that I do not know (Jeremiah 33:3). He has many mysteries that He reveals to those who call upon Him, and one of these mysteries is my own self. Only a friend who loves me can uncover this mystery. My friend's heart unites with Jesus in love for me, and in this union they attack me, pouring their agape upon me, breaking the rusty chains of fears and stereotypes, and pouring the healing balm of love and friendly concern into my heart. Wielding the shovel of agape, my friend, with God's help, uncovers talents and treasures within me that I never even suspected were there. I had no idea what was stored within my heart until my friend's love discovered this wealth of the soul. He speaks these things aloud to me. I am afraid to believe them, yet I understand that they are true. All of it was within me but inaccessible to me. It awaited that particular friend who, with the help of his love, could dig it up, see it, and present it to the world as a masterpiece of God's grace, inspiring admiration and wonder in those around us.

If I had decided to extract all this myself, I would have been ridiculed as an empty braggart. But my friend's love made his discoveries within me beautiful and true.

I, in turn, do not sit idly by. I explore my friend's heart and, with God's help, show him the great and mighty things he does not know about himself. Our joy in discovering one another has

no limit. We love one another. We are explorers in the realm of the closed heart. We become physicians of the soul.

Other friends whom Jesus brings into my life discover new treasures within me of which I also know nothing. At the same time, they allow me to love them and make amazing discoveries within them.

All this exists within love and friendship, and everyone who learns the science of love while maintaining an eternal transaction with Christ will grow to this point. Heaven desires to become rich through our love, and someday Jesus' dream that we will love one another will come true.

And He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied.

He who abides in love for his friend abides in God, and God in him.

The first loving friend may not appear immediately. Yet my love for people will not remain unnoticed, and a friend will decide to take the risk and dare to love me. This travail of his soul will be rewarded with a wonderful experience of mutual love and pure friendship that will bring joy to our hearts throughout life.

Love does not grow weary. It does no harm to another person. It does not risk becoming a curse. It crushes sin and opens a more excellent way.

The Faithful Witness counsels us to buy this gold from Him so that we ourselves may become rich and enrich all Heaven with the interest of our praise.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Proverbs 10:22; 12:25; 17:17; 24:26; 25:15; 27:9; Ecclesiastes 10:12; 12:11; John 13:34–35; Revelation 3:18; Joshua 21:44–45; Psalm 103:1–5; 1 John 1:7; 4:7–13; Galatians 5:6; Ephesians 4:11–16; Acts 1:14; 2:1, 46.

## Revelations Through Communication

What can be said about a person who remains silent, and what discoveries can be made about someone who says very little? How can we look into a quiet person's heart and understand the structure of his inner world?

When young people plan to start a family, they find a great deal of time to communicate with each other. They enjoy listening to the other person and sharing things about themselves. They reveal their inner worlds, recall many interesting stories from their lives, listen with their hearts, and are prepared to set every task aside simply to spend time together. During this period, the entire world becomes distant and uninteresting compared with the person before you.

While spending time in this way, people come to know one another and open themselves so that they may also know themselves better.

How can you determine what you like and dislike if you never try anything? How can you discover who you truly are if your inner world rests in the land of silence and the world of your thoughts and feelings finds no outlet through words and communication?

It is very difficult to identify a foolish person while he remains silent. At such a time, he looks very wise and appears observant and sensible. But as soon as he opens his mouth, you immediately discover with whom you are dealing.

Actions also reveal much about a person, but they will never disclose the beauty of his heart, although they may bring considerable benefit to someone. We expect actions from one another and try through them to determine another person's character and display our own. Yet all my good deeds cannot reveal to you the intimate and inaccessible things stored in the depths of my heart that do not manifest themselves in any way.

What would we know about God if He told us nothing about Himself? Through our guesses, we would create for Him an

image of our own invention from the available facts. The Bible reveals the depths of God's heart to us through brief revelations scattered throughout Scripture. We must find, remember, and compare them all. God says a great deal about Himself through nature and His creation. But the Creator reveals Himself most fully in the life and character of Jesus.

Unfortunately, although we know a great deal about Christ, we know Him very little. Such knowledge comes only through personal communication with Him. The Holy Spirit reveals many aspects of the Savior's life to us in a new light. Through the eyes of faith, I can discern details I never noticed before. In prayer, I plead for a deeper knowledge of God. He speaks to me in the language of revelation and admits me into His inner world. I find rest and come to know my Creator, although I do not hear His voice, and my personal knowledge is not entirely understandable to my friends. God has a special voice through which He communicates with us. Not everyone is able to hear it, and each person who does hear it hears it in his own way.

But in His desire to reveal Himself to us, the Lord gave us the beautiful commandment to love one another. Love implies close communication. Only through communication do we come to know more closely the person we love and open ourselves to him through our love.

Why do many marriages collapse immediately after the wedding? Often it is because the deep discovery of one another ceases, romantic infatuation evaporates, hormones subside, hearts close, and there is nothing left to discuss. Discoveries are replaced by faultfinding, the pursuit of personal ambitions, warfare against another person's opinions, and dissatisfaction with the other person's behavior. Where were these things before marriage? Communication and the knowledge of one another gained through it covered all the corrupt qualities of the soul. The other person's inner world enchanted you through its uniqueness, and it seemed that no better person existed in the world. But time is the best means of destroying the castles in the air built by the imagination. The longer you know a person through communication and actions, the better you

understand with whom you are dealing. Hasty marriages often lead quickly to disappointment.

At times, I have spoken with people whose marriages were on the brink of collapse but had not yet fallen apart. If there was no violence or adultery, finding the cause of the discord was very simple. The enemy of the soul seeks to separate close people from one another and immerse us in the world of our own ambitions, opinions, and stereotypes. In this love of self, the surrounding world is lost, and I fail to understand what wonderful people surround me. Yet they become wonderful to me only when they begin opening themselves to me.

Think of some of your friends and try to understand which of them are especially dear and close to you. Then ask yourself, 'Why are they so dear?' Most likely, you will discover that they have close, trusting communication with you.

Of course, we are all different. We perceive one another differently, and our understanding of this lesson will not be identical. Yet it is worth noting that communication between us plays the most important role in our relationships, in our love for one another, and in our knowledge of truth. Knowing implies communication.

Physical intimacy with a spouse opens the world of feelings through touch and sensation. Although this brings temporary pleasure, such experiences merely open the door to deeper knowledge at the spiritual level. If everything ends there, emptiness replaces communication and, like a solid wall, separates the spouses' hearts in silence.

What would we know about God if He did not communicate with us? Only the facts presented in the Bible. And what do you know about a friend with whom you do not communicate? Exactly as much as you heard during your last conversation.

You know much about me from these lessons, in which I also tell you certain things. I allow you into my world without knowing you. Yet through these accounts about myself, I seek to teach certain lessons of truth that the Lord reveals to me. You read and, through my inner world, come to know the One

Who has revealed Himself to me. Later, when we meet personally, it is easy for you to open yourself because you already know me and trust me as a friend. All this takes place through the communication provided by these lessons and your responses to them.

Through this, however, the Lord teaches us also to love those who are near—the people whom we can embrace and look in the eyes. Communication with such people opens your heart to your friend and your friend's heart to you. In these relationships, Jesus reveals His beauty to us as well, presenting us to one another as people through whom He desires to reveal Himself even more. Love works a miracle within this communication. I discover my friend's unknown world, and he comes to know me. The presence of Christ within our fellowship allows us to enter deeply into revelations about one another without fearing anything.

How can I discover what treasures are hidden in the earth beneath my feet if I do not begin digging and searching for them? How can I discover my value if I sit in silence and open myself to no one?

How can you know a friend without communicating with him? How can you know God without speaking with Him? The answer is simple: you cannot. Decide for yourself, then, how you will love a friend without communication or a relationship with him. Good deeds are valuable and necessary, but they exert the right influence when a relationship and close communication exist between us. Discoveries of the soul come as we speak with one another and listen with the heart.

If I desire to see something great and hidden within my friend, God will reveal it to me through our communication, unveiling a new and unexplored world within my friend's heart.

Bible Verses for Reflection

1 John 1:3–7; 2 Timothy 2:19; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 2 Corinthians 6:14; 13:13; Psalm 32:3–5; 94:17; Proverbs 3:32; 10:20–21; 16:21–24; 17:28; 25:11; Ephesians 4:20–24; Matthew 12:37; Ecclesiastes 3:7.

## Enriched by Love

Not long ago, I worked as an employee for a construction company and eventually became a foreman. I always enjoyed work connected with erecting large buildings on undeveloped land. Everything would have been fine except for one small problem with my wages: they were not enough to cover our current expenses. We had to live continually in debt, dreaming that someday all this would end and we would finally ‘begin to live.’ My daughter knew that her father never had money, and she was ashamed of this before her classmates. At times, I had to take out loans to repay debts to the bank, then spend several years paying back with interest what I earned each month through my labor.

Despite these circumstances, for some reason my friends considered me very wealthy because I lived and worked in western Germany. Yet I did not even own personal work tools at home because I would have needed money to purchase them. I visited hardware stores as though they were museums, calling them the ‘Exhibition of the Achievements of the German Economy,’ and examined and studied the tools I could have enjoyed using if they belonged to me.

At one point in my life, the Lord introduced me to a real estate broker who wanted to renovate his home. I offered my services, and the work moved forward. Because of this man, my financial situation improved slightly, but my debts did not disappear.

After some time, this broker suggested that I start my own company. He promised to provide me with work and said that my financial condition would improve.

I was afraid to take this step and prayed a great deal. The Lord answered my questions with His approval and helped me understand that I should go forward without fear because He would be with me everywhere.

I took a step of faith and became self-employed. A new world of interesting possibilities opened before me. All my small dreams of acquiring good tools were fulfilled very quickly, but I also

began to lack time for my personal life. My entire way of life changed, and everything began revolving around the new company. Although I never became wealthy during all the years of this new work, because so many more important needs surrounded me, I learned how large amounts of money can be earned honestly. Yet this required certain risks and capital investments. Knowing how something can be done does not necessarily mean living that way or possessing it.

The Lord fulfilled all my earthly dreams, which proved not to be so precious after all. But through my new work, I was able to enrich my friends with the things with which the Lord blessed me. I asked them what they needed and then fulfilled their dreams according to my abilities. Looking back, I realized that if I had remained in my former job, I would still be struggling with debt and dreaming that someday I might buy myself at least one good cordless drill. Now, because of me, many of my friends possess excellent tools that I once could not afford for myself.

When I became part of the Christian world, I did not know who I would grow to become. My continual concern for my family's well-being limited my time. I had to grasp many truths while on the run and dream that something in my life would change. I dreamed of having many spiritual friends with whom we would love one another, but I had neither the time nor the knowledge to understand where to find them. All my attempts to become a friend ended at the first crossroads of conflicting opinions. Afterward, we would part politely, and I would have to search for new friends while dreaming that someday I would meet someone who appreciated me and loved me unconditionally. Only in Jesus did I have such a Friend, Who was faithful in everything and never left me. I walked among Bible verses about friendship and love as though they were an exhibition of the achievements of Christian relationships from centuries past, unable to imagine how such relationships could be attained in my circumstances today.

But the Lord was preparing me for great changes. He helped me understand that a better life exists in Christ and called me

to take a step of faith, enter into a transaction with Him, and become self-employed in the spiritual world. He promised to provide me with revelations about great and mighty things if I called upon Him for them. Jesus also helped me understand that He would enrich me if I dared to engage in a special kind of trade. I did not understand what this meant, but I ventured to take this step of faith and pleaded for agape love without even understanding how my life would change or what awaited me. A new world of amazing revelations and interesting opportunities became available to me. My dreams of friends began to be fulfilled with remarkable success. Within these friendships, I discovered new dimensions of love of which I had never been aware. My entire way of life changed and began revolving around this new love. I can honestly say that during this time the Lord enriched me with the love He had promised and, through me, began enriching all my friends. My habit of giving away everything valuable proved very useful in distributing God's blessings. I never learned to keep them secret from my friends but shared them at all times.

The Lord fulfilled all my dreams of loving friends and made me a loving friend as well. I no longer dream about them. I love them and pray for them, rejoice in their words and their spirit of love, and enrich them through my attitude and friendliness.

Love not only made me rich in love but, through me, also enriched everyone who desired to become rich in it. All my personal revelations became part of my friends' lives and continue bestowing gifts upon everyone who desires to obtain gold refined in the fire.

My loving friends became God's blessing to me, which maketh rich and addeth no sorrow with it. I became the same kind of intermediary source of enrichment for them—a friend who loves at all times.

Heaven decided to keep the doors of the bank of love open for those who responded to the counsel of the Faithful Witness and became regular customers. Air, water, and love—all these fill the endless Universe and become my Eternal possession, never ceasing within my life. I breathe, drink, become rich through

the gifts of God’s grace, and purchase them without gold or silver.

It is difficult for me to imagine how I once lived without this trade, continually in debt and dreaming only of somehow breaking even and no longer living on credit. But the Lord not only paid all my debts; He also gave me gold tried in the fire. This is truly a genuine treasure of which I am not ashamed to boast.

When I tell others that I love, that I understand what love is, and that I possess it in abundance, it is as though I boast in God and in the fact that I know and understand Him within myself. I understand that the Lord exercises judgment, lovingkindness, and righteousness toward me. Through love for those around me and for my friends, I become rich in special revelations about how this love loves at all times, how wonderful it is to possess it, and what happiness it is to love.

What does a loving person lose? He loses the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. It once seemed impossible to live without these qualities, but love fulfills every need of the soul so completely that you cannot imagine why you would want anything else when you can simply love.

The commandment to love one another no longer seems to me like something belonging only to the history of early Christianity. We love one another, and this brings joy to the heart every day. Within this is something special, important, and truly valuable that can be purchased only with Eternal love.

Bible Verses for Reflection

1 Samuel 2:7; 2 Corinthians 6:10; 9:8; Isaiah 13:12; Psalm 45:13; Revelation 3:17–18; John 13:34–35; Luke 12:16–21, 31–32; Proverbs 10:4, 22; 17:17; 18:24; Luke 16:9; John 15:12–13; 1 Timothy 6:6–8; Jeremiah 9:23–24; 33:2–3.

## Endless Discoveries

At the very beginning of my Christian journey, there was a very dark period of my life that is painful to remember. As I grew in the truth and studied inspired writings, I concluded that a great deal had been revealed to me and that I had come to understand many things. I learned to distinguish good from evil and tried to do only what pleased God. But together with this knowledge, I received the ‘gift of discerning sin in other people.’ I became a true specialist in identifying the corruption of my dear brothers and sisters. Moreover, I could quickly find the right quotation that precisely proved my discovery and confirmed that I was right about the matter in question.

I saw sins in everyone the Lord sent me, although I did not always have time or desire to tell every person about them. My favorite verse at that time was Isaiah 58:1: ‘Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew My people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.’ Naturally, I regarded myself as the chief hero of this verse. I was bursting with pride because I was obeying this command of God so successfully.

Like attracts like. People just like me—other ‘sin spotters’—began appearing in my life. We enjoyed discussing the transgressions of people who, in principle, should have been strongholds of purity and truth.

The only thing that surprised me was why my dear brothers and sisters politely avoided me. I could not understand such behavior. I wanted what was best for them and desired to save them from their sins, yet for some reason they did not seek friendship with me. The brothers who respected me for my directness made me uneasy because at any moment they could also discover within me a great many shortcomings that, for some reason, were present in my life as well.

Living in such a spirit discouraged me. I understood that I had no love, no friends, and no knowledge of what happiness was.

The world seemed very gray. My only Helper was Jesus, Who continued to accept me and care for me tenderly.

The summer of 2009 arrived. I was in such a deep spiritual crisis that I no longer knew how to continue living. I had parted from my ‘truth-bearing friends,’ but I did not understand where to find new ones.

Despite all this, I realized that the Lord had not rejected me. He was still preserving me and holding me by my right hand. I did not know where to go next, but I continued moving somewhere. The saddest thing I understood was that, despite all my talent for seeing the sins of others, I possessed no love for those people—or for anyone else. I did not know where to obtain love or what love was. But I remembered that God is Love. I gathered my courage and told Him that I had no love, that there was nothing good within me either, and that I desperately needed this gift. To my surprise, my request was answered. The Lord gave me confidence that He had heard and answered me, and now His love had become mine as well.

I had not expected such a turn of events. I became very interested in how this love would manifest itself in my life, what it would bring me, and whether I would be able to preserve it.

The years passed. I studied, and love taught me what you can read in the lessons of our School.

Now the Lord has opened new sources of blessing that can be discovered endlessly for ourselves and others.

Now, when I look at a person, I do not see his sins but the many beautiful treasures hidden within his heart. It is fascinating to excavate a friend’s soul, bring forth the precious from the worthless, and enrich both myself and, of course, my friend through such discoveries.

How much goodness is stored within every person! How many beautiful things we carry within our hearts without even knowing how rich we are in the various qualities of the soul!

There is, however, one very important principle. Only unconditional love can excavate these talents and enrich with

them everyone who possesses interest and longing. When such love is mutual, it begins working miracles of revelation.

I enter the new world of an unfamiliar heart in order to make discoveries within it. I am surrounded by my friend's caution and fear, impregnable walls, rusty chains and locks, experiences of former pain, and uncleared debris from past offenses and disappointments in people. Upon the walls of the soul, I see deep scars, bleeding wounds, and festering sores left by human experiences. Amid all this, I begin searching for the great and mighty things that the Lord promised to show me if I called upon Him.

I take out my shovel and, together with prayer, begin carefully exploring the soil of the heart. Suddenly, I see a familiar gleam. I kneel and uncover the first revelation.

What a miracle! I have found an incorruptible hidden treasure with a beautiful name that reflects my friend's character. I remove it carefully, clothe my discovery in words, and share it with its owner, calling by name what has been revealed to me. My friend listens and involuntarily looks around, trying to make certain that no one else is nearby and that my discovery belongs only to him and concerns him personally. He is not accustomed to hearing such things. In his opinion, I am probably mistaken. But I persistently and convincingly express what has been revealed to me. I trust my eyes and cannot have miscalculated.

My friend cautiously takes my revelation and begins considering and examining it with distrust. Meanwhile, I dive deeper in search of new treasures. The Lord shows me the way and draws my attention to dark places within my friend's heart so that I may dig there. And, oh, what a miracle—I make another discovery! I grasp it gently, clothe it in meaningful words, and then run to my friend with it to bring joy to his heart.

My friend is still slightly bewildered and trying to recover from the first discovery, while I overwhelm him with new revelations. I tell him how beautiful he is within and what a wonderful

person God has given me in him. My friend looks around again, thinking that I am speaking to someone else. Then, when he realizes that I am speaking about him, he draws inward with emotion. I give him another treasure and disappear again into the depths of his heart.

I do not hurry to reveal everything at once because I fear that my friend may be unable to bear so much happiness and may declare my discoveries a pleasant fairy tale. Yet my confidence convinces him that he truly is the beautiful and amazing person revealed to me.

Days pass, and I continue discovering more and more within my friend’s precious heart, finding so many beautiful things that I myself am amazed.

I have noticed that the love with which I enter my friend’s soul possesses healing qualities. It heals every wound, tears down impregnable walls, removes fears, and brings cleanliness and order into the heart of the keeper of treasures who has now become dear to me. I am no longer here merely as a guest. I have the status of a true friend, for whom new depths of the soul are opened where no other human being has ever been. And this causes no one to be afraid.

Such responsibility frightens me, but I can no longer leave this heart, nor do I desire to, and I do not even know how. I have become so accustomed to being enriched by discoveries that it is easier for me to continue and find even more than to make a hopeless attempt to leave.

But the most amazing thing is that all these treasures reflect God’s character. I understand that the Lord Himself created this likeness of Himself within a human being so that we might reveal it to one another, enrich one another through it, and return what belongs to God back to Him in the form of unearthly joy and gratitude.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Jeremiah 15:19; 33:3; Hosea 4:7–8; Romans 2:1; John 13:34–35; Job 28:9–11; Proverbs 10:22; 11:25; 17:9, 17; 18:8, 24; 21:10; 22:11; 27:2; Ecclesiastes 4:9–11; 12:11; Song of Solomon 7:11.

## The Infinite Heart

There was a time when I dreamed how wonderful it would be if a true friend appeared in my life who would... Beyond that, I could not even imagine what a true friend should be like. Life in a worldly environment had left its mark upon my thinking, creating certain stereotypes about friends and friendship. I already had friends who remain close to me to this day, but I longed to gain some new, godly, genuine friend who would miraculously sense all my spiritual and physical needs and meet them. I was certain that in Eternity everyone would be very friendly and that all my dreams would certainly be fulfilled there. But while I live in this world, I also desire to taste a small piece of Heaven here and receive at least a little of what will exist there in abundance.

God answered my longing and, in the person of Jesus, became this Friend Himself. I understood how wonderful, tactful, and friendly He is and how good and peaceful it is to be with Him. Yet even after finding peace with God and abundant fellowship with Jesus, I did not cease dreaming about some spiritual friend, although I did not even understand what I needed.

Brothers and sisters who were kind and friendly to me surrounded me. Visiting one another became a regular part of life, yet something was still missing from my heart.

At that time, I did not even understand what I wanted or whether I desired something that could truly exist. Only now, knowing the power and influence of love, can I describe what was happening to me in the past and why no one could help me with it.

My longing for love found expression in sincere prayers to Heaven, in which I boldly asked for this great gift. How I wished then—and still wish now—to meet someone who would teach me this love, reveal the principles of friendliness and happiness, and instruct me in the rules of Heavenly communication.

The Lord helped me understand clearly that if you want many friends, you must first become friendly yourself. If you desire to enjoy what is good, first go and sow this seed in good soil.

New ideas and possibilities did not arise in a single day. Something great that I had not known before was not revealed all at once. Step by step, the Lord led me from experience to experience, from victory to victory, and from mistakes to success. Now, as I speak these simple words to you, they rest upon many years of experiencing God’s blessings and trials. I have lived in practice what is being presented to you, my friends, in such a beautiful form.

A longing and thirst for a true friend is present within every heart. If you have such a friend, value and protect him. He is God’s gift to a human being in this restless world.

If you have not yet been so fortunate and your dream has not yet come true, do not despair. Everything is in your hands. Begin taking the first step in this direction and become a true friend yourself, living and acting as an eternal friend.

It is worth noting that if you plan to form a friendship, prepare yourself for an eternal relationship. Otherwise, it is not friendship but a superficial acquaintance with a pleasant person.

From childhood, we were taught that a friend is someone who will never betray you, who will lay down his life for you, and who will share with you whatever is needed. Are you ready to become such a person? Life shows that many barriers exist within relationships, both in me and in those with whom I would like to be friends. But love teaches us how to tear down all these barriers properly and give one another something unconditional, pure, and eternal.

My heart is ready to receive friends. As I see this readiness, I understand that this heart no longer resembles a stone with fixed limits upon its behavior that sees nothing beyond the end of its nose. God placed His heart within me, calling it a heart of flesh, and wrote His laws upon it, making them part of my way of thinking. This did not happen in a single night. But

throughout my friendship with Christ, everything moved toward my becoming this kind of person.

As I open my heart to a friend, I understand that his soul has a beginning and an entrance, but there are no limits to knowing it. I did not invent this; I saw it. It simply cannot be otherwise.

If we are destined to live only this earthly life and limit ourselves to friendship with earthly friends, there is no need to possess an eternal heart. My death or my friend's death would end the journey into my inner world, and I would receive only the minimum needed to adorn my earthly life. But I am prepared for endless existence with eternal relationships, unconditional friendship, and unceasing discoveries.

I also understand that the new heart of every friend of mine is as eternal and infinite as the Lord Himself. When He created us, He placed limitless potential within our nature that will eternally delight our friends with new discoveries and blessings. It will be impossible to die of boredom while communicating with a friend who invites you into a new depth of his heart and allows you to discover something great and hidden within it that you do not know—and of which even he himself is unaware.

I believe fascinating discoveries await us in this realm. And if we consider that many of our future friends with infinite hearts will enter Heaven, each gladly opened for our exploration, we will have plenty to occupy us during the first part of Eternity. As we discover the treasures of our friends' souls, we will enrich them and all of us with those treasures, dedicating the greater portion of these valuables to God.

But the most fascinating exploration will be the journey into the Eternal Heart of God. Within Him, we will discover many radiant qualities of God's soul that we can boldly reflect upon our friends, amazing them with new discoveries about themselves.

We can already begin enjoying the special benefits of such relationships. We can begin today.

God does not forbid us to love one another. He earnestly commands us to treat those around us in precisely this way. Love works miracles in every relationship, especially in the relationships of friends who love one another. When we enter the path of continual discovery and exploration, dealing with a friend's infinite heart and opening our own infinite heart to him, we can continue the relationship endlessly. Do you agree?

If you are waiting for Eternity before entering an eternal relationship with a friend, I believe you risk losing something very important. Eternal Life has already begun for those who believe in Jesus, accept His will, and live in obedience to His law. Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.

Being a friend is so fascinating! And being an eternal friend is the inevitability awaiting all God's children in the approaching Eternity.

The fallen angels were offered this opportunity, but for some reason they chose death. Now they envy us, knowing what infinite expanses are opening before us. They have lost them forever. Therefore, the task of the fallen angels is to make us disappointed in love and faith and deprive us of every hope of salvation. Many obstacles and trials await us upon this earth, and our friendship will also come under attack. But let our commitment to friendship also be eternal, so that nothing can shake or distract us.

God, Who has begun this good work within us, will perform it until the Coming of Christ. Then throughout Eternity, He will continue leading us in this knowledge of one another and of Himself. How fascinating all this is!

Bible Verses for Reflection

Philippians 1:6; Genesis 1:27; Ezekiel 11:19–21; 36:23–31; Hebrews 10:16–17; Galatians 6:7–10; Proverbs 17:17; 18:24; Jeremiah 31:3; John 3:36; 4:36–37; 6:40; 10:27–28; 13:34–35; 17:3; 1 John 5:10–14; Hosea 2:19–20; Ephesians 1:16–19; 1 Peter 1:22; 5:10; Romans 2:6–7.

## God’s Protection in Love

A long time ago, while reading books about happy family life—even books by unbelieving authors—I noticed an interesting feature. All these people said that happiness cannot exist without mutual love and that unconditional love protects children from external spiritual attacks. How I longed for someone to love me in this way! But we do not choose our parents, and I simply did not know what it meant to love unconditionally. A certain restrictive barrier stood within my mind that I could not overcome. I did not even try, because I believed that a person must be loved for some reason, while loving someone without a reason depended only upon one’s mood and applied only to good people.

Once I read that children must be wrapped in love before they are sent out of the home into the world, so that this love will protect them throughout the day. The author assured me convincingly that this was vitally important for a child and gave him confidence to overcome every difficulty in life. I looked at my little daughter and wondered what all this looked like in practice. Where could I obtain such clothing? Who could show me what it looked like in real life? It was easy to speak figuratively, but I did not know how to apply this image in life.

For some reason, I believed that words of love were intended for couples in love so that they could enjoy themselves before the wedding. Afterward, love had to be proved through actions. I was not alone in understanding it this way.

One day, I came across the book The Five Love Languages. It opened my eyes to the fact that love has its own principles and qualities, which each person perceives differently. I identified my love language and waited for someone to begin speaking it to me. But for some reason, those close to me did not seek to bring me joy through their love, even if they knew the language of my heart. I simply did not know how to love anyone unconditionally. I loved as well as I knew how, believing that sincerity was what mattered most. But my sincerity changed together with my mood.

When I was a teenager, there was a man in my life—my cousin's father, Uncle Misha—who always treated me with love and respect, welcomed my suggestions, and never scolded me for my mistakes. Being with him was easy and interesting. Because he worked as a bathhouse attendant at an upscale establishment of that time, I regularly visited him at work and used the steam room and sauna free of charge. But what I loved most was Uncle Misha's friendly attitude toward me. He was always happy to see me, paid attention to my small needs, and helped me in whatever ways he could.

Time passed, and Uncle Misha died. Lung cancer carried him to the grave very quickly. At his funeral, I could not believe that this great friend was gone. It felt as though my heart had been buried with him. I did not know where to find another person who loved in the same way, nor did I search for one.

It is difficult to reflect upon love or discuss its influence when you do not possess it and have no one who loves you. There is nothing with which to compare it, and in such a condition, you must invent it for yourself.

But I liked the thought that love protects the person who is loved. I carried it carefully within my heart, believing that someday it would be useful to me. My little daughter was the first person upon whom I tested my new understanding of love. I saw how much she enjoyed being a beloved little girl and that this protected her to some degree. But I was inconsistent in this attitude and could change it according to my mood. We all understand that our parents made many mistakes, yet they cared for us and loved us as well as they could, and we forgive them. But when raising your own child, you always regret missed opportunities that can never be recovered.

Now that the Lord has given me Himself in the gift of agape love and is teaching me how to use it, I understand the influence love exerts upon a person's mind and worldview, protecting him on every side. Even simple words of love spoken at the right time provide very powerful support for many wounded hearts. Although a person expects actions, at a subconscious level he needs acceptance and unconditional love.

This is how we are made within, and we must remember it. Even animals understand this language; intelligent human beings will understand and accept it all the more.

Although the most powerful support in spiritual conflict is knowing that God loves me, this requires faith, a good imagination, and memory. Human love is unique because it can be seen and heard. It can quickly convince you that someone loves you and that you are very dear to him.

The greatest blessing for any children is the love their parents have for one another, which extends to the children themselves. The atmosphere of Heaven reigns in such families, and a person who sees love within his home finds it easy to imagine God's love as well.

My love for my friend is my decision, yet it is also Heaven's gift to my friend. This love contains special protection and support for the person I love. Words of love are also very important. The enemy of the soul hears what I bestow upon my beloved friend. In essence, I am saying: 'May God, Who protects and preserves me within me, also be with you according to my word, protecting and preserving you.' It may sound as simple as this: 'I love you very much, my friend. You are very dear to me.' These and similar words of love wrap around a person's mind like a shield, protecting him from many attacks. He simply pays no attention to things that otherwise might harm him or spoil his mood. The enemy of the soul knows the power of words of love and fears that we may sincerely give them to one another. He has no power to overcome those whom God enfolds through our human wishes and kind words.

Have you noticed that sometimes even a simple compliment lifts your spirits, so that you do not see the dirt beneath your feet or pay attention to many things happening around you? There is even a saying that, for those in love, the sea is only knee-deep and no storm can trouble them.

People may forget what you said to them, but they will never forget how they felt while communicating with you. If my love does not make my friend feel good, then either something is

wrong with my friend or something is wrong with me. My words and assurances of unconditional love give God authority to pour this very love into my friend’s life according to my word and bring my declarations to fulfillment.

If words of love mean nothing to many of you, remember that they play an enormous role and exert great influence in the spiritual world. Love is one of God’s names. When He hears that He is being invited into our relationships, He comes.

Words also possess creative power within a person’s spiritual world. If you continually and sincerely tell your friend about your love for him, eventually he will accept it and live in it, enjoying the depth of this relationship and becoming free from the stereotypes accepted by society.

Do not wait for someone to love you someday. Begin loving others yourself and wrapping your friends in God’s protection through your words, and they will certainly respond in the same way. Do you want to be loved? Give this love to others, and it will return to you. Do not worry if no result is visible at first. The seed must germinate, spring up, and mature into good fruit.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Isaiah 44:26; Philippians 1:8; Psalm 91:14–16; John 13:34–35; 1 John 1:7; 4:7–16; 2 Thessalonians 2:16–17; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; Philippians 2:1–2; Romans 12:9–10; Galatians 6:7–10; Colossians 4:6; Isaiah 58:10–11.

## Coming Out of the Shell

My friends' son, Danilka, decided to conduct an experiment in hatching chicks. He read how to make an incubator at home, prepared everything, obtained two eggs, and began the experiment.

His room had a central-heating radiator that could be adjusted to the required temperature. He placed a towel on top of the radiator and wrapped the fresh chicken eggs in it. The chick embryos began growing and developing within the shells, and he could observe them by holding the eggs near a lamp.

At last, the long-awaited day arrived when the life within the shells began breaking through. First, small holes appeared, made by the chicks from inside. Then cracks spread across the surface of the shells. Danilka decided to help the young chicks escape from their prison. He broke the shells and set them free. The teenager's joy knew no bounds. He felt like the father of these sweet creatures. He held them, kissed them, admired them, and thanked God.

But this happiness was not destined to last long. Very quickly, these young creatures grew cold and died. Danilka was devastated. He wept over the death of these fluffy little ones and was inconsolable in his grief. His parents had to arrange a solemn funeral and bury the dead creatures behind the house.

Afterward, Danilka began investigating why his little friends had died so quickly when everything had proceeded according to plan and on schedule. He discovered that the process of emerging from the shell must never be accelerated from outside. The chick must grow strong on its own, receive a portion of fresh air through the opening it has made, gather strength, and, through further effort, free itself from its dwelling at the time appointed by God. Through this process, the chick receives the strength and resources needed for further growth. It then begins developing harmoniously within its new environment, discovering the new world around it and becoming acquainted with others of its kind.

When speaking with fellow church members, I sometimes ask whether they keep the commandments of God written in the Bible. They look at me with surprise and assure me that, yes, they do. Then I ask whether they keep Christ's commandment to love one another. At this point, the surprise disappears, and they begin to think. Deception will not work, but they do not want to tell the truth. Then I ask whether they have a friend whom they love with Eternal love and who loves them in the same way. A pause follows, after which I usually hear sincere admissions that they have no such friends. Then I give them hope that this can be corrected and invite them to our School of Agape Love, assuring them that if they begin studying this science, they will certainly learn something and their lives will change.

I can only tell people about our School and invite them. Each person must emerge from his own shell according to the strength and desire he possesses.

Loving one another has particular principles and qualities that must be respected. Events must not be hurried, lest what should spring up and find its own way out be destroyed at the root. Every seed has its own incubation period. Only a smile can instantly gather an abundant harvest of the good fruit of smiles in return.

Much has already been written about love. As I studied this science, I chose a friend for this love and decided to test the full power of this weapon upon him. With God's support, I make the final decision to love my friend eternally, forever, at all times, and under every circumstance. I offer a prayer about this to the Heavenly Father, ask for His blessing in the Name of Jesus, and announce before the entire invisible spiritual world that from now on I will always love my friend, both upon this earth and throughout Eternity. At this time, something good also takes place within the spiritual world. My request is recorded in the Heavenly books, and an unlimited account of God's agape is opened in my name. This love is now available to me at any time and in any amount, without restriction. I joyfully tell my friend about my decision. Together, we rejoice over this great

event in our friendship, and my friend can now make use of my friendliness at any time and make his life happy according to his need.

We experience such joy and happiness within this decision of mine. Without outside help or pressure, I emerged from my shell on my own and decided to love the dear friend Jesus gave me. My gratitude knows no bounds. My friend is as happy as I am, but I am even happier because I love. No one can take this joy from me.

Yet I also understand that the commandment concerning agape for one another is mutual. My decision to love is only my decision. Although my friend rejoices in my new attitude toward him, he is still sitting within his own shell. I greatly desire to help him emerge from it, and I know how this can be done. The temptation is very strong. I long to make an appeal and pull this dear soul into the embrace of my love so that together we may become full participants in obeying God's command.

But something within restrains me. I understand that I must not hurry another person's will or help him make rapid decisions for which he has not yet matured. The happiness within me is ready to crash down upon this fragile shell of human indecision, sweep everything away, and free my friend's will from its cracked enclosure. But the Lord places His hand upon my shoulder and gently stops me. He persuades me to wait—to wait for a long time—and continue loving my dear friend tenderly, patiently expecting the moment when he himself decides to love me with Eternal love and asks for Heavenly strength to do so. He will certainly tell me when this happens. Afterward, he will surely reassure me several more times that he has become established in this decision and that it has now been written forever within his heart.

Until this happens, we continue our friendship. I love someone very dear to me who is still considering how he should continue living or does not yet understand what is required from his side.

The Lord respects my freedom in relation to Him. He waits a very long time for my decision to love Him from a pure heart—

not merely in words, but with an understanding of what this requires.

The science of love is not revealed to the mind in a single day. First, it conceives a Heavenly embryo within my heart. Then it forms the organs of feeling and perception and shapes my consciousness and will. When I grow strong in this development, love begins showing me the way out of my lukewarm condition, giving me strength to overcome obstacles and tear down strongholds. I understand that I am in a comfort zone where I may rot if I do not emerge into the freedom of Eternal love. I make a decision, gather courage, and step into the abyss of God's boundless ocean of agape. Immediately, I fall into God's hands. They strengthen me in my new decision and then establish me by taking me through fiery trials. I can only watch and marvel.

Then a miracle occurs: my friend pokes his joyful head out of his shelter and, with a happy smile, tells me that he agapes me too. It is so wonderful that there are no words for such happiness!

Bible Verses for Reflection

1 Peter 1:22; John 13:34–35; 14:15; 15:9–19; Exodus 20:6; Deuteronomy 7:9; Psalm 112:1; Matthew 12:29–31; 24:12; 1 John 3:23–24; 4:19–21; 5:1–4; 2 John 1:5–6; Revelation 22:14.

## A Gift Forever

When I met my future wife, we spent all the time between my business trips together, thinking of places we could go and things we could do. The romance of travel and shopping trips were our favorite ways to spend time. No political situation troubled us. We even managed to vacation in a country where military operations were taking place. Our vacation spot was located near a mined area. But such things did not concern us very much. We lived our own lives, and we were happy.

Everything was arranged around us and our relationship, and it seemed that nothing could interfere with our romance.

In 1993, we were offered the opportunity to move permanently to Germany. We regarded it as another journey and agreed. No sooner said than done.

And so, in a foreign country, we received residence permits and began exploring the local sights and stores. Every idea was immediately discussed and put into practice. A new faith in God was also added to our lives.

After six months in Germany, my wife told me that she was pregnant and showed me the ultrasound image of our future daughter. I understood that great changes would soon take place in our lives, and I was not mistaken.

In September 1994, Daniela was born into this world. From the first minute of her life, she loudly expressed her opinion, greatly delighting us and all the doctors. Our entire life underwent serious changes. We began arranging our daily life around the newest member of our family. We did not ask what she wanted from us, where she had suddenly come from, or how long she intended to interfere with our living, sleeping, and resting. We accepted this little miracle as a gift from the Lord and had no intention of getting rid of her. No one explained to us that children are forever. Somehow, we immediately figured this out for ourselves.

Our entire life now revolved around this little child, who periodically reminded us of her presence very loudly or protested against our failure to give her proper attention.

From the first days of her existence, this little person entered our lives rapidly and became so firmly established within our hearts that we could no longer imagine life without her.

As Daniela grew, she passed through various stages in the formation of her personality, and I saw her in different states of mind and moods. Yet the thought that she interfered with my life, or that this world would be better without her, never even occurred to me. She entered our world to take her place within my heart forever and never leave it.

God gives me friends whom I can choose or who choose me. Once, I lived without them and did not suffer at all because my future friends were wandering somewhere in the world and not making any particular effort to find me. My heart knew none of those whom I had not yet met as friends. It waited calmly for the time when it could open itself to someone and receive that person.

Many passersby entered my life, visited me briefly, and then left forever. I became accustomed to the idea that the transit of people through my heart is a normal condition of life in our world.

But people also began appearing in my life who entered my soul in order to remain there forever. When my heart accepted this new person as a friend, there was no longer any thought that he should disappear or leave as quickly as possible.

Becoming acquainted with Jesus opened new possibilities for gaining new friends. But first, the Lord Himself became my Friend. He occupied within me a space as great as Himself—a place that had formerly stood empty, waiting for the day when it would become warm through the presence of the One Who had every right to it, although He stood modestly at the door of my heart and knocked quietly. I admitted Christ, and He became the One around Whom my entire life began to revolve. I

can no longer imagine life without Him, and His place within my heart belongs only to Him.

But the Lord loves giving surprises. He continually invites different people into my life, giving me the opportunity to draw close to them and fill my heart with some of them. How fascinating this is!

It turns out that I was self-sufficient and needed no one. Then suddenly a friend burst into my life, opened my soul through his joy, and became my friend so that he could always remain one.

My inborn selfishness resists such companionship and continually desires to separate me from the people who are dear to me. But Jesus gives me a special heartfelt attachment to my friends called love and friendliness. Without this Heavenly glue, my heart would be unable to hold anyone and would suffer greatly from every broken relationship, leaving behind the marks of painful loss. But love binds my will so firmly to all my friends that I can no longer imagine how to live without them. At times they may be invisible like the stars, but I know they exist.

Jesus not only gives me new friends but also teaches me to love them. Love not only treats my dear friends kindly; it also makes them mine forever, establishing them within my heart as permanent residents.

When a friend becomes my friend, he becomes my friend forever. I cannot tell him, ‘Let us be friends for a year and then decide whether we should continue together.’ That is not friendship but merely a relationship. Friendship is something Eternal: it begins at a particular time but never ends.

God does not give me a child for a few years and then give that child to someone else. He will not tear from my heart those whom I have registered there forever. This is the Lord’s plan: that we give one another as gifts forever. Through His love, He binds our relationships eternally. He desires to teach us this here and now by commanding us to love one another.

Everything bound within my heart by love remains there forever.

We read in Isaiah 49:15–16: ‘Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands; thy walls are continually before Me.’

God desires to endow me with the qualities of His love so that I will never forget those whom the Lord has given me to be my friends forever. At the same time, He gives me to my friends so that through His love they may bind me to their hearts as well. Only such bonds will be accepted by Heaven. Then within this friendship and love, we will possess an Eternal blessing.

If a mother of many children were asked which child she did not need and which one she could easily give away and forget, I believe the normal answer would be, ‘None of them.’ The same answer can be given concerning the friends of my heart. Love has made them mine forever, so that I will never give any of them away to anyone.

Although the enemy of the soul will try to make me disappointed in my friends, love will not allow me to lose these souls who are dear to me. They are mine eternally, and only death can separate us for a short time. But at the glorious Coming of our Lord Jesus, love will unite us again into one Heavenly family so that we will never be separated again.

There is a great deal of room within my heart. There will be enough for everyone Jesus gives me to love forever.

I am committed to love, but I cannot force my friend to treat me in the same way. That decision lies within my friend’s power.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Proverbs 17:17; Psalm 127:3; Ephesians 3:18–19; Matthew 18:18–19; John 13:34–35; Jeremiah 31:3; 1 Corinthians 16:14; Galatians 5:6, 13; Ephesians 4:2; Philippians 1:8; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 5:12–13; 1 John 3:10.

## A Friend's Duties

Every area of our life in this restless world requires us to fulfill certain duties. They are automatically placed upon us as we participate in a particular activity or by virtue of belonging to a particular community.

The first time I encountered direct duties imposed upon me by the state was when, at a certain age, I was drafted for military service in the Soviet Army. The constitution of that time stated that military service was the honorable duty of every citizen of the country.

During my service, I was given military regulations that defined my direct duties. From the first day, I was required to memorize them. They were called 'The Duties of a Soldier.'

During my service, I was promoted to the rank of junior sergeant, which carried its own duties that I also had to memorize.

The commanding officers required all service members to maintain relationships according to military regulations and strictly monitored compliance. Every violation was stopped immediately and brought an appropriate disciplinary action or punishment.

I also frequently witnessed young couples establishing families while deeply in love with one another and very happy. They were prepared to serve each other from morning until night and please each other in everything. But time passed, and strange structures of rights and duties rose upon the ruins of love. I often witnessed what happens when love departs from a relationship. Sometimes one spouse acquires special rights while the other receives duties, and sometimes the arrangement is reversed. It was very sad to hear that one person owed something to another while the speaker himself claimed the right to a special status.

Although secular society should not serve as an example for students of the School of Agape Love, I also decided to define a

friend’s duties and express my position quite clearly in this lesson so that none of my friends would entertain any different ideas.

At first, to understand what reaction my list would produce, I decided to read it aloud to a close friend and see how my invention would be received. His reaction surprised me greatly. I believe your freedom-loving will is likely to respond in the same way. Yet I understood clearly that every person whom the Lord has given me must hear my list of ‘a friend’s duties.’ Once they learn it, none of them will have any chance of avoiding the performance of the direct duties I have established as law for each of my friends.

I take into account the conditions of the last days, our close relationships, and my love for my friend. Yet my conscience simply does not permit me to leave him without this additional weight of meaning.

My dear friends, I would very much like you to memorize this list of ‘a friend’s duties’ and never forget any of the rules that will be placed upon your shoulders.

Let us now begin declaring what we have finally reached through our education in the School.

A Friend’s Duties

My dear friend, you are required to:

1. Always remember that, to me, you are the finest person in the world.

2. Understand that Jesus loves you and paid an extremely high price for your salvation, and that you must form your opinion of yourself according to that price.

3. Know that I love you at all times and, when necessary, will come to help you in times of adversity.

4. Give all your cares to Christ in prayer, because He cares for you and desires to take all your burdens upon Himself.

5. Never doubt that, in my eyes, you are a wonderful and intelligent person.

6. Be certain that my vocabulary will always contain many kind words of love for you. You may expect them from me at any time and ask me to speak them to you if I become distracted by something else.

7. Accept the fact that you have become my friend forever and eternally, so that even death cannot separate us.

8. Be certain that even if we do not communicate for a long time or are occupied with our own affairs, you still remain my friend and will never lose this status.

9. Understand one simple thing: you are always my friend, even if something changes in your worldview or you commit a sin that deprives you of the right to Eternal Life. You can always rely upon my love for you and upon my understanding of your condition without condemning you.

10. Understand my status in relation to you. I have been given to you not to judge you but to love you.

11. Come to me with needs in which I can participate according to my strength and abilities.

12. Understand the simple truth that I am not Christ and cannot resolve all your problems or carry their weight upon myself. I am a friend who is always ready to lead you to Jesus, Who will help you in everything in the best possible way and can understand your need in every situation.

13. Know that you are very dear to me.

14. Accept the fact that, in my eyes, you are always better than I am, but Jesus is better than both of us.

15. Remember that you are God’s blessing to me, which maketh rich and addeth no sorrow with it.

16. Know the simple truth that your soul is like a storehouse filled with the treasures of your amazing qualities. I can continually find and discover them within you so that throughout this life and then throughout Eternity, I may bring joy to your good heart.

17. Understand that I do not see you as you imagine yourself, but as my love for you reveals you to me.

18. Do not forget that I also enjoy participating in your life and helping you with matters that are difficult for you to resolve on your own.

19. Count on me to participate joyfully in all your joys, share my happiness with you, and always be your friend.

20. Memorize this list and do not fear that anything will be removed from it.

21. Speak to me with words of love and friendliness if they fill you to overflowing and you can no longer contain this blessing within yourself.

22. Know that at any time, you may also define my duties toward you and expect me to fulfill them.

23. Remember that even while remaining my friend, you are completely free to arrange your life as you consider right.

24. Keep in mind that your place within my heart belongs only to you. You will never lose it, and no one else will occupy it.

25. Understand the simple fact that this list of duties always remains open to new items discovered during the working process of our relationship.

26. Never doubt that all these rules were written from a pure heart and are true concerning you.

I would very much like to see your face, my friend, as you read this list of your direct duties. I would also like to hear what your heart experiences as you consider the meaning of the words I have written to you.

Perhaps your heart will rebel against such arbitrary conduct on my part and disagree with something. Do not rush to conclusions. Allow time and God to reveal all this to you in the proper light.

Jesus called us to love one another, and through this love for you, I arrived at what you have just read. I hope you have

clearly understood your direct duties toward me and will fulfill them impeccably. May the Lord help us.

Bible Verses for Reflection

John 3:16; 13:34–35; Proverbs 10:22; 17:17; Isaiah 43:4; Romans 12:9–10; 15:1–3; Psalm 133:1; Ephesians 4:2–3; Philippians 2:1–8; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 1:7; 1 Corinthians 13:1–8.

## Eternal Debtors

An acquaintance of mine named Gena decided to borrow money to develop his business. He came up with a good buying-and-selling plan, calculated everything, saw the expected profit, and firmly resolved to carry it out. But he had no money with which to become rich. He did not dare go to a bank. The application process there was very complicated, and most likely they would not have given him anything.

Somehow, my acquaintance learned that if you asked criminals for money, they would provide it quickly and without red tape. He approached some local gangsters, presented his business plan to them, and promised to repay everything immediately after completing the deal, including interest. They gave him the required sum.

Gena joyfully anticipated a successful deal and was already dreaming about how he would spend the profit. But something did not go according to plan, and all the invested funds were lost.

Gennady realized that an unusual trial had begun for him. He went to his lenders and told them everything exactly as it was. They calmly explained to him that debts had to be repaid, including the interest; otherwise, the conversation would be different. Gena promised that everything would be settled and began thinking about where to get the money. He understood that he had entered voluntary slavery, but there was no way out.

Several difficult years of exhausting labor passed without reducing Gena’s debt at all. His strength was sufficient only to pay the accumulating interest. But Gena did not give up. In four years, he repaid three times more than he had borrowed, yet the debt did not become any smaller. His strength was running out.

At that time, my acquaintance came to know God and decided to ask Him for help. The man to whom Gena owed the money was imprisoned for murder, so the debt had to be paid to the

man’s mistress, who spent the money on herself and told no one about it. When all this came to light, Gennady realized that his debt had become even greater, and he was frightened. But the lender’s sister promised to settle everything. And the matter was resolved in the best possible way.

Debt is something that makes us slaves to the lender. Proverbs 22:7.

Sin placed us under an unpayable debt to the law, which declares that the wages of sin is death. Romans 6:23. But One was found Who took upon Himself the sins of the whole world and paid for them with His life. Through faith in Jesus, I became free from every debt on the condition that I also forgive my debtors.

Rejoicing in my newfound freedom, I understand that I owe no one anything—and what happiness that is! My conscience is clear, my mind is free, and my life is filled with many different possibilities.

But suddenly I learn that, as it turns out, I have become an eternal debtor, with no chance of ever freeing myself from it. We read in Romans 13:8: ‘Owe no man any thing, but to love one another…’ With my mind, I understand that love is good—very good, in fact—but the word ‘owe’ somehow troubles me.

To love out of a sense of obligation is probably the most improper motive that could govern my desires. How can this be? And considering that love is Eternal, I become an eternal debtor.

Perhaps the apostle Paul decided to make a joke? But if we take into account that this command applies to everyone, then not only I, but every one of my friends has no chance of getting around it. And we all become debtors to one another!

But is every debt bad in itself?

Let me mention some things that are also obligations:

You must remain faithful to your beloved wife;

Throughout Eternity, you will have to breathe and walk on your own feet upon the New Earth;

Throughout Eternal Life, you must eat the fruit of the Tree of Life every month and drink the Water of Life.

I think such obligations do not frighten any of you. They bring joy rather than despair.

In saving us from the power of sin and the burden of cares, the Lord does not leave us idle. Instead, He places upon us His yoke and burden, which we must bear. Yet He also says, ‘For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.’ Matthew 11:30.

The duties Jesus places upon us are quite interesting and unusual in their nature. They take the freedom of my will into account, while at the same time they are intended to bring me happiness, joy, and peace.

At peace and in friendship with God, my body returns to the original harmony of relationships, returns to normal, and begins releasing hormones of happiness into my bloodstream, gladdening my heart for no apparent reason. Love establishes my mind and body in this Heavenly harmony and brings my every action, experience, and motive to perfection.

But the problem of my time is that I do not possess love and do not know how pure it is in its original form. All kinds of voices offer me counterfeits and impose their stereotypes upon me, and I become confused, mixing truth with error.

But the Lord has not left me in ignorance. He invites me to enter into Eternal trade relations with Him so that I may continually buy pure gold from Him and use it to repay my debts to all my friends, enriching them with my love and expecting the same from them in return. After all, they are my eternal debtors.

Nothing earthly or impure can pay the debt God has placed upon us. Only God’s pure love is able to settle all my eternal obligations.

And I would not want to live eternally with those who might suddenly decide that they no longer owe me anything and stop sharing their love with me.

The earthly nightmare of lovelessness and sin will not inherit Heaven. I can say with confidence that only agape love will enter the Heavenly Kingdom, so that, having begun in my life here, it will never end there.

Something interesting emerges. We are offered two powers that desire to keep us in constant dependence upon them. On one side is Satan, offering the benefits of this world; on the other side is God, offering Himself. There is no third decision or choice. I cannot belong to myself. If I am not with God, I automatically come under Satan's influence.

But God's burden is easy. It brings me joy. When I receive love, it fills me so completely that from morning until evening I desire to share it. I simply must give it to someone; otherwise, it will cease to gladden my heart. No one else—I myself place myself under the obligation to love my neighbors continually, and my friends especially. For if I do not share this love, they will find joy and happiness elsewhere, while I will be left without the blessing.

It is difficult for me to imagine how my friend could begin a new day without words of love from me and live through the day without my reminder that he is the finest person in the world. It is hard to imagine a worse scenario.

When I enter into marriage with the person I love, endless family debts and duties await me. Yet this is precisely what I want, because I love the one who is so dear to me and expect affection in return.

Love catches a person's soul in its nets in order to gladden the heart forever, provide new ideas for expressing itself, and fear nothing. Love casts out all fear, and even the distant reaches of Eternity, with their endless amazing discoveries, do not frighten it. Love has boundless imagination with which to devise something new forever and present what is already known and familiar in an original way.

This world is far too small for love. Love needs Eternity so that, across its vast expanses, it can carry out the boldest projects and bring every idea to life.

I have a question for you, my friends: ‘When will you repay your debt?’ The doors of my heart are open, and my ears are ready to receive daily payments.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Proverbs 22:7; Romans 6:23; 8:12–14; 13:7–8; Matthew 6:12; 11:28–30; Luke 17:10; John 4:24; 9:4; 13:14; 1 John 3:16; 4:11; Galatians 5:25; Philippians 2:5; 3:16; Hebrews 12:9; Acts 5:29.

## Rooted and Grounded in Love

There was a time when, as a child, I could not distinguish one make of automobile from another. To me, all vehicles were simply cars of different colors. When I listened to acquaintances discuss the models available in our country, I did not understand how they differed from one another.

But the time came when I decided to understand the difference between a Lada and a Moskvich, and between a Zaporozhets and a Volga. I began asking experts to explain the differences between these cars, and they showed me not only the differences in their appearance, but also those in the technical specifications and durability of every automobile available in our country.

Time passed, and I bought my own used car and found a good auto mechanic whom I visited regularly to have each new problem repaired. For the most part, I drove around my city and the surrounding area, afraid to travel long distances because I knew the car could break down at any moment—which it periodically did.

All this was normal life for me until I traveled abroad. My amazement knew no bounds when I discovered that some automobiles were built so well that they could run for a very long time without repairs while also being very comfortable and economical. My myth that Soviet cars were the best was thoroughly shattered.

One day, back when I still watched television, I learned from a program how Mercedes automobiles were assembled. I was impressed by the manufacturers' approach to the quality of every model. Before entering mass production, every new model must undergo durability and endurance testing. For this purpose, a special test track was built with many kinds of road surfaces—with holes and bumps, uneven sections, and potholes. A new model must be driven over all these roads day and night. They even invented robotic drivers for this purpose, which can be controlled from a central control room. In a separate facility

stand the new engines for the future vehicle, running day and night under different operating conditions and loads in order to determine their service life.

The head of the Mercedes-Benz corporation said, ‘We build our automobile very slowly, but it sells quickly.’ A vehicle’s endurance is the first important factor the manufacturer takes into account and tests.

But no less attention is given to the comfort and safety of the passengers. An automobile is created not to transport firewood, but for people of different ages and professions. I also saw how cars are deliberately crashed from different directions in an attempt to determine what protective measures must be taken so that the occupants will remain safe or sustain minimal injuries in a collision. Many different protective mechanisms have been invented and built into the roof and doors, the steering wheel and seats. Air bags and seat belts must be present in every new model. Yet when I get into my car, I do not even think about the tremendous labor and intelligence invested in this invention. I start the engine and drive. Some people are more interested in the shine of their car’s exterior than in understanding how it is made.

I chose my most recent automobile very carefully, trying to determine what would not break down quickly, would be comfortable, and would be inexpensive. As I gathered this information, I identified through numerous reviews the model that I eventually purchased. My expectations were fulfilled. I have been very pleased with what I currently own.

In the Word of God, there is an interesting phrase: ‘rooted and grounded in love.’ Ephesians 3:17.

Usually this verse is read very quickly, but I paid attention to it and tried to understand what it means. After all, one can simply possess love and love others with it. Why is it necessary to become grounded in it? This is where the most interesting part begins. It turns out that I want to own good things and use them for a long time, while spiritual treasures are somehow

supposed to enter my life on their own, and it does not matter how they are constructed.

The Faithful Witness counsels me to buy gold tried in the fire. What does this mean? It tells me that all the goods in His store have already passed through trials—and that they will take me through this fire as well.

We have already discovered that gold symbolizes faith and love. Once these treasures become mine, they will be tested by an external fire which, by its very nature, also transforms me within.

What will happen to a vessel into which molten metal is poured, or in which that metal is melted? Everything that exists at a normal temperature begins either to burn or to be transformed when it comes into contact with fire. Only fire-resistant materials will undergo no change.

As a human being, Jesus passed through the full fire of human passions and attacks. The Love that He Himself was underwent testing from every direction. There was not a single temptation that did not assail Christ, but He faced everything worthily. He allowed this fire to test the strength of Heavenly Agape so that it might be established forever.

The Heavenly Father permitted all the forces of evil to test the Heavenly gold and, through this trial, to reveal to the entire spiritual and visible world the unshakable foundations of love—whose firmness no one could have perceived under normal conditions. The Cross revealed the power, beauty, depth, and strength of God’s love. The entire universe witnessed how firm the foundation of God’s statutes is and how beautiful His character is. This trial also revealed the utterly repulsive nature of sin and how deeply a being can fall when it deprives itself of God’s love and avoids God’s presence.

When I receive God’s agape in answer to prayer, I do not feel any visible changes, but my worldview, habits, and thoughts inevitably begin to change. I begin to see everything around me through different eyes. Love cleanses and educates me.

When the testing of my love comes, love teaches me to act rightly, to respond rightly, and to relate rightly to what is happening to me and to those who are testing me. In the fire, the Lord establishes my faith upon the firm foundation of His love.

As I communicate with friends in the spirit of love, I also become established in the right spirit of tenderness, friendliness, and joy. My mind very quickly absorbs the lessons and spirit of love that I repeat and practice in my life day after day. Obvious changes cannot be seen in a single day, but they are taking place. Being grounded in love becomes firmly inscribed in my character and burns away everything foreign that love cannot permeate or dissolve.

And this is the most important thing God's love does for me: it clearly presents the beauty of God's character to my heart. Nothing testifies to my mind about God so distinctly as God Himself within me through the Agape that has become established in me.

As I love my enemies, neighbors, and friends—and truly love them—I understand how God loves this world, how He treats His enemies, and how He desires to save us all and give us what makes it possible for Him to have fellowship with us from within.

Not every trial brings me joy while I am passing through difficulties, but the spirit of love gives me victory in everything and establishes me in love forever. What could be better than love? Only a personal meeting with the One Who is Love.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Ephesians 3:14–21; Revelation 3:18; Psalm 37:22–24; James 1:3–5; 1 Peter 1:22; 4:12–19; 2 Peter 1:5–8; Psalm 93:2; 112:5–10; Proverbs 24:3–5; Isaiah 44:26; Matthew 22:37–40; 1 John 4:16; Romans 3:31; 1 Corinthians 2:5; Hebrews 2:18; 2 Corinthians 1:21–22; Colossians 2:6–7.

## Developing Relationships

When I hear a great deal about love and friendship, read extensively about them, and grasp the theory of this science, a certain vision forms within me of what they should look like in my life. All that remains is to begin this undertaking and plunge into it headfirst.

There is a fundamental law of friendship described in Proverbs 18:24: ‘A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly…’ This principle teaches me that the presence of friends in my life depends first of all upon me and upon my attitude toward those around me. I have tried this method and have become convinced that it works.

Not everyone wants to be my friend, and some people consciously avoid any kind of relationship. But for the most part, human hearts open themselves to mutual friendship.

There is also a difference between friendship and close friendship. Our hearts may be deeply wounded by previous relationships with other people. Sometimes the injuries inflicted cause immeasurable pain to the soul, and your new friends do not want to go through something similar with you. But love sees this and begins tenderly healing hearts and planting its banner within them. We can love one another sincerely without having a close relationship or deep fellowship. Or we can open ourselves to it. Then our knowledge of one another will begin to grow.

A great deal depends upon mutual affection, a shared desire to enter into this relationship, and the decision of both people to continue and sustain it.

The most interesting part of any friendship is its beginning. The purpose of friendship is to enter a friend’s heart forever and place that friend within your own heart in such a way that both of you feel at home there.

There are factors that make us very uncomfortable and create a certain inner barrier that may slow or stop the development of close, heartfelt relationships. These may include:

— a large difference in age;

— not understanding the language your friend speaks;

— not understanding your friend’s love language;

— your friend’s marital status, especially if the friend is of the opposite sex;

— religious disagreements;

— a worldly spirit in the relationship;

— my own marital status, and much more.

But let us take ideal conditions as an example and observe how they develop. I take the initiative in showing friendliness and identify the person who, in fact, is to become my friend. I pray about it. In my heart, I decide to be a friend forever. Then I inform this new candidate for a place in my heart that I have now appeared in his life—a person who has decided to become his friend. Or I may simply suggest, ‘Let’s be friends.’ In any case, the other person begins to understand the reality that he is being invited to enter a new level of relationship that did not exist before. He needs to decide, sort through his feelings and thoughts, and make a choice. This decision may take a couple of minutes or a couple of months. For my part, I am ready to move into the relationship and plunge into it as quickly and deeply as the other person permits. Yet I give him freedom, respect his choice, and proceed at the pace he desires.

The friend has decided to become mine and has allowed me to enter his life. The process of getting to know each other begins. Once again, I ask God to give me that abundance of love and friendship which will enrich my new friend without making him uncomfortable. As we communicate freely, I watch very carefully so that I do not cross the boundaries established by this new gift from the Lord.

If this person is of the opposite sex, I immediately establish my own boundaries by explaining my marital status and assuring my friend that I love my wife and can build our friendship within those boundaries. People usually agree with this approach and do not violate these boundaries themselves.

As my new friend comes to know me more closely, he also allows me to know him. A moment arrives in the relationship when we understand that God has given us to one another forever, that everything between us is pure, and that the Lord blesses us. This is something new and unusual even for me. I do not know what to do next with such a friend, so I decide to take the next step by offering him mutual love according to the commandment of Jesus. The friend agrees without knowing what will come of it. In prayer, we ask God to bless this relationship, relying only upon God's wisdom and protection, and we plunge headfirst into knowing one another. At the same time, we respect each other's will, and I continually ask whether I have gone too deep, to which I receive the joyful answer that everything is all right. At such a depth, the Lord begins to show me the treasures of my friend's soul and open doors that no one has ever entered. With joy, I tell this gift from the Lord how wonderful he is and how many magnificent qualities have been placed within him, thereby delighting and surprising the person with whom I am speaking. I do not merely list the riches I have discovered in his soul, but also explain in detail how they reveal themselves. And my dear counterpart tries to find something similar in me and tell me about it.

The most pleasant and joyful phase of friendship begins: 'the newness of the relationship.' We are ready to explore one another, sharing the beautiful things being revealed to us that bring us such great joy. Fears move aside; we desire to know our friend more closely and to reveal more of ourselves as well.

This relationship is so beautiful and pure that our lips continually thank the Lord for such a magnificent gift for life.

A moment comes when you decide to say the most important words—words you have never said to anyone, but now can no longer hold back: the words that you love your friend. You

immediately make it clear that this is not human love, but love received from Heaven. Although at the height of the relationship, it can be very difficult to understand how to distinguish between them. Your friend joyfully listens to your declarations and assures you of the same, making it clear that he also loves you with agape love. The fears leave, and it becomes easier and easier to speak about love without being afraid to possess it.

The enemy of the soul will certainly try to distort all this and add something carnal to this union, but God’s law keeps my thoughts from every evil, and nothing causes me to stumble.

I ask my friend to share with me immediately any impure feelings that may take possession of his heart, assuring him that I will do the same.

As I go about my usual affairs, I sustain our relationship and periodically make contact in order to share yet another joy from my new discoveries about the wonderful design of my friend’s soul.

Our relationship moves to a deeper level. In a spirit of love and friendship, we begin discussing various everyday and practical matters, periodically marveling at new discoveries in our souls. We are interested in knowing each other’s opinion and point of view concerning one event or another. With tenderness, we can express disagreement with something we dislike or oppose.

Sometimes, when I see a troubling inconsistency in my friend’s behavior, I do not try to rebuke him directly. Instead, I give an example from my own life, explaining how I understood it then and how I understand it now, allowing him to decide for himself.

We greatly treasure our friendship in Jesus. It becomes easier for us to part with all our sins and peculiarities than to lose one another.

We no longer speak as often about our love for one another; we live and share friendship through that love. It permeates our

entire relationship, and we breathe it, although at times we can declare it once again simply to gladden our hearts anew.

And all of this has been commanded to us by Jesus.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Proverbs 17:17; 18:24; Song of Solomon 8:6–7; 1 Samuel 20:17; Psalm 119:165; 1 Peter 1:22; Romans 5:5; 13:8–10; John 13:34–35; 17:26; 1 Corinthians 13:1–8; 16:14; Galatians 5:6, 13; Ephesians 4:1–3, 14–15; 1 Thessalonians 3:12–13.

## Free Will

While speaking with His fellow countrymen near the treasury in the temple, Jesus made an interesting statement: ‘If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.’ John 8:36.

Christ’s mission was to reveal God’s character to people, free the human will from the slavery of sin, and restore the likeness of the Lord within the heart. Without Christ, all this would have been impossible. But Jesus showed everyone how He sets the human will free.

Three distinct lines of liberation of the human will can be traced in the Savior’s ministry:

1. Liberation from the power of disease;

2. Liberation from the power of demons;

3. Liberation from the power of errors, heresies, and stereotypes.

All this led people to recognize their helplessness before the forces of evil, to repent of their sins, and to thirst for God’s blessings, thereby giving Jesus the authority to free their will from slavery to sin.

When the will is in bondage, its master can impose his course of conduct upon it, persuading a person to do whatever he desires. A soul in which Christ does not dwell is under the control of evil forces that decide according to their own will whom to control and how. The enemy of the soul does not always reveal his dominion over a person in a visible way. He allows people to be kind, polite, and friendly—but only in such a way that they never come into contact with Jesus.

Satan has a most reliable ally living within each of us: our carnal nature, that very old self which is not subject to God and indeed cannot be. It is also tragic that this carnal person within me will never repent. The enemy of the soul knows this very well and always tries to use human nature for his own

purposes. In alliance with the forces of evil, my carnal nature continually attacks my will, desiring to bring it under its control.

My will cannot live alone, but it is able to choose. The enemy is prepared to use any method to take possession of the human will. He is ready to offer anything—from the whip to the carrot—if only he can become the master of my choice.

Having no other claimant, my will is compelled to do whatever its master dictates. The enemy cannot force a person to sin, but he persuades that person so skillfully of the necessity of committing lawlessness, and then holds the human will so tightly in the grip of wickedness, that nothing and no one can free it except Christ.

Jesus respects a person's choice and sets no one free by force. His approach to people is entirely different. He reveals His unconditional love to the world. Christ serves suffering people, displaying a selfless spirit, compassion, and friendliness. The Lord values the human being within each person. He always has something kind and beneficial for me. Knowing firsthand the sad condition I am in and the forces of evil that attack me and hold me in their power, Jesus approaches me, bends down, and asks whether I desire to be made whole.

Throughout everything beautiful that comes from Christ, a very clear line of respect for my freedom of choice can be traced. Although He possesses omnipotence, which even Satan and all his hosts must acknowledge, the Lord patiently waits for my decision concerning every one of His offers.

Even in order to deliver me and make my will truly free, Jesus first desires to know whether I want it. Amazing love!

While enslaved to sin and deprived of any possibility of making a reasonable choice, my will is still able, when brought under the influence of God's grace, to see the light and recognize its value. In a way I do not understand, the Lord momentarily frees my consciousness at the time of my choice so that He can offer me something better. For this purpose, He uses His servants, inspired books, personal appeals through the Holy Spirit, and

many other channels. What will I answer when God asks whether I desire to be set free?

My will must decide something. I may pause in order to weigh everything. I may give a quick answer. Or I may fail to understand anything at all, or show unbelief that my deliverance is possible and that it is so simple.

I say to Jesus, 'Yes, I do.' My will immediately clings to Him; faith overcomes every doubt and relies upon the faithfulness of God's Word. The Lord receives me into His arms and rejoices with me.

Then the most interesting part begins. I remain in a human body and continue living in this world. The Lord releases me and gently tells me to follow Him. I am accustomed to submitting to the power of sin and going wherever it draws me, but now I have received the power to choose my direction and decide what to do with my freedom.

Freedom in Christ means that I may follow Him, or I may return to where I was. In sin, there is no such choice.

Freedom means freedom in everything. But I choose Christ and declare this to Him. He respects my choice and takes my will as His bride. I become God's friend, accepted by Heaven and free to answer love with love and friendliness with friendship.

In our human relationships, we must be guided by the same principle of respecting another person's freedom of choice—even when that person is our closest and dearest. If my friend has expressed a desire to participate or cooperate in something I have proposed, I can rely upon him and expect actions corresponding to the decision he has freely made.

This feature of relationships should always be remembered and taken into account. We were all created for a free life in friendship and love.

But a friend's freedom does not mean that he will become my shadow and do whatever I want and expect from him. At any moment, he may change his decision and act as his conscience

directs. In the same way, I am free to build what I consider to be the right relationship between us.

Of course, all this must remain within the boundaries of God's law, which preserves us in purity and holiness. Within these boundaries, we may permit ourselves everything to which our will gives consent.

When I offer my friendship to a new friend, I wait for his decision. I know that this person is held captive by many stereotypes that may cause him to disagree and reject the offer. But I do not give up, knowing that I have come under special observation. I decide to be genuine and to resemble Jesus in respecting freedom. At the same time, I do not retreat from my intended goal, but carefully present the benefits of our friendship, assuring the person that I have come to stay forever.

Although I do not have enough time for all my friends, this does not prevent me from gaining them, filling my heart with them, and bringing them joy through my presence throughout my life.

The friendship has been formed, and we can move forward. My friend decides to bring love into our relationship and tells me about it, asking for my opinion and decision. I am free to answer as I consider right, but I choose love. I likewise offer my friend love from my side and watch to see whether he accepts it.

Within human relationships of love, the plan for our union with the Heavenly family is revealed. I bind myself to my friends with bonds of love so that this decision may also be bound in the books of Heaven.

But here on Earth, and later throughout all Eternity, my will shall always be free in the freedom that is in Christ. Throughout Eternity, I shall be free to choose the path that God's providence offers me. But the beginning of this freedom is established here and now in Jesus.

Bible Verses for Reflection

John 8:31–36; Luke 4:18–19; Revelation 3:17–18; Galatians 5:1, 13; 1 Peter 2:13–17; 2 Peter 2:19–20; 1 Corinthians 8:9; 2

Corinthians 3:15–18; Romans 6:12–23; 7:1–6; Psalm 1:1–3; 119:45; 2 Timothy 2:23–26; 2 Thessalonians 3:5; John 6:38.

## We Will Have a Wonderful Time

Whether we want to or not, each of us will have to travel the whole course of life and achieve many of the goals we have set, and then appear before God with all of it and give an account for everything.

I very often observe the following situation. When someone plans something, he prepares himself for failure, a spoiled mood, and defeat, so that afterward he can declare, ‘I knew it!’

A person goes on vacation intending to have a pleasant time with his family, yet thinks only about the possibility that the weather may turn bad. The weather can be unpredictable, and very often it ruins the plans that have been made. As a result, everything and everyone around him becomes responsible for his spoiled mood.

My expectation of failure gives me no chance of experiencing anything beautiful in my life. I am playing a lottery in which I continually lose my happiness and joy.

‘That is exactly what I thought!’ ‘But I warned you!’ ‘The grass is always greener somewhere else!’ These and similar slogans become the sad epilogue to everything that could have ended differently.

We have all experienced disappointments, failures, and losses. I never gamble or buy lottery tickets, because all of this is Satan’s invention for continually robbing and disappointing us and teaching us that our whole life is a game in which success comes by chance. Placing our hope in a lucky break or a winning ticket proves to be yet another castle in the air which, like a mirage in the desert, dissolves before our eyes when we try to grasp it.

I have decided to live my life in joy and happiness, in love and friendliness. I know that interesting trials await me—trials that will test my faith, try to tempt me, or destroy my life. My heart is set on possessing a happy spirit. My personal motto is, ‘Wherever I am is a good place to be!’ I have Jesus, Who will

always help resolve even the most difficult situation in whatever way He considers best. But I myself decide what my attitude toward the problem will be.

If I want to have a pleasant time somewhere, I am not troubled by the weather, difficulties, or unforeseen adventures. I set my mind on victory and move confidently toward it.

In 2018, I was supposed to fly to another country to conduct my first-ever seminar about love and friendship. All my preparations took place at the last moment, and I barely made it in time to check in for the flight. Then I leisurely headed toward the gate, strolling through the airport and assuming that the plane would not leave without me. To my surprise, at the end of the terminal I came to a closed door—a door that had closed for good. I understood that my trip was now in question and that this was the consequence of my ignorance. But I had to decide what to do next with the situation. Thoughts pressed into my mind, seeking to spoil my mood, accuse me of carelessness, and reproach me with the idea that everything would have been better if I had acted differently. A struggle was taking place upon which the happiness of my new day depended. I decided to be happy and grateful for everything, because I was on vacation and wanted to enjoy it. It was very difficult to rejoice, but I determined to respond to my foolishness in exactly that way. And you know what? It worked. Although I had to travel to the meeting place by bus, I had set my heart on happiness, and happiness remained with me.

When I plan to become someone’s friend, this includes my friendliness, my love, and my kind attitude toward this new gift from God. The new friend’s free will may respond in any way, and I do not know what will come of it, but my expectation of happiness is my personal choice.

If I decide to love and ask God to establish me in that choice, I have support from above and can boldly remain in agape even if the decision is one-sided. Love is already a victory. It is the one certain way out of any situation. It is a winning ticket that will surely enrich my life and my experience.

‘But what if it works?’ This line of thought is optimistic, yet the little word ‘if’ gives me an opportunity to retreat. I am counting on chance and risking defeat. But why take a risk where I can be a victor?

I am not speaking about self-confidence, in which life can very quickly expose my foolishness and ignorance. Once I entrusted a coworker with building formwork and pouring concrete into it. I could see that the structure was weak and would not withstand the pressure, but my assistant assured me so convincingly that everything would be fine that I left him and drove to another jobsite, seeking to avoid worrying. When I arrived at the construction site the next day, my coworker looked like a whipped dog. With downcast eyes, he apologized for something that could no longer be corrected. His structure had not withstood the pressure, and what was supposed to be straight according to the plan looked very crooked.

My expectation of happiness may resemble that structure made of boards, which will certainly be tested. If I violate every law of happiness yet decide to remain happy, perhaps I will be happy —but everything around me will turn out crooked.

When people are dying nearby, my visible joy would be inappropriate, but that does not mean I should fall into despair. My expectation of happiness must have a firm biblical foundation. Then it will not matter what expression is on my face at that moment, because peace will reign within my heart, and I will be able to pass that peace on to others.

‘We will have a wonderful time!’ When we build our future with this expectation and do everything possible to reach that ‘wonderful,’ we will be victorious. And if we also study the science of our ‘wonderful’ and put it into practice in our relationships, then we truly will have a wonderful time. It will become a consistent result rather than a matter of chance.

When people start a family, they believe they will be as happy in it as they were before the wedding. But trials come and reveal the weak places in the relationship. How should they live from that point forward? There are two paths. One can blame

the other person for every trouble and seek allies in doing so. Or the two can examine the heart of the problem and preferably seek a wise solution together. The ship of happiness on which we sail through life belongs to both of us, and we must decide whether it should continue sailing or be allowed to sink.

Friendship is also a spiritual family, with its own laws and distinctive qualities. It is tested no less severely. An intention to be friends only under certain conditions allows for the possibility that the friendship will fail. But a commitment to victory and permanence makes me genuine, because my friendliness rests upon Christ. By His example, He teaches me to love, to be a friend, to look at life cheerfully, and simply to live while enjoying the blessings of God’s presence that accompany my choice.

By choosing love, I commit myself to victory, but my negative attitude can disappoint me even in Eternal values and return me to the proverbial broken trough with nothing.

If I have decided to become a wise builder and build my house upon a rock, I should study the laws of construction and, knowing them, boldly begin the work. Something beautiful will certainly result.

If, in my desire to become a friend, I choose agape for this purpose, something beautiful will result. And if my friend has the same intention, together we will be able to build our shared ‘Wonderful.’

Bible Verses for Reflection

Ecclesiastes 5:1; 8:15; Matthew 6:22–23; Luke 11:33–36; 1 Timothy 6:17–19; Psalm 133:1; Proverbs 31:10–12, 18, 25–26, 30; James 3:14–18; Ecclesiastes 6:11–12; 9:4–10; 11:4–9; 12:13–14; 2 Corinthians 5:10.

## The Last Conversation

At the end of August 2022, I received word that my friend Anya Alexeyeva was dying. All her doctors had given up on her and sent her home to die. As soon as this news reached me, I immediately began calling out to the Lord with my questions and requests for this dear soul. No matter how difficult things may be for us here, there is always hope that, in answer to our prayers, God can change a great deal. Each time, I anticipate an extraordinary answer and wait to see how my faith will be rewarded.

Anya and I met at a camp meeting while we were eating at the same table. As usual, I offered her my friendship. It was very interesting to observe her. She did not agree immediately, but from that moment on, she studied me very carefully. The years passed, and from time to time my dear sister and I crossed paths, sharing the joys of life in Christ.

When enrollment opened for students in the School of Agape Love, Anya immediately joined those who desired to study the science of love. From that time forward, our relationship began to develop and grow stronger.

As I listened to Anya's answers to the lessons and responded to her questions, we came to know one another better and to learn more about each other. Our mutually friendly fellowship began revealing to us those hidden treasures of our hearts that cannot be seen by a superficial glance. Anya told me the story of her illness, and I began to understand that our friendship on this Earth would not last long. But the months and then the years passed, and we came to know one another better and better. Together we experienced our little joys, together we grieved over certain problems, and together we sought the best way out of dead ends.

Anya understood that this world did not have very much to offer her, so she built her beautiful Heavenly future while living in her temporary body. To me, she became an example of

optimism at the edge of her approaching grave, and I became accustomed to speaking with her in a joyful spirit.

There were times when Anya disagreed with some of my thoughts and expressed her objection in her homework answers. I listened to her and asked her to publish those answers in our group so that others could also learn her point of view. She was frankly surprised, and then she tried to understand me as well.

There were many occasions when trouble came to Anya or her family, and I was one of those with whom she dared to share her small sorrow. We prayed for one another and for the problems to be resolved. And the Lord gave us amazing answers.

When I was told that my friend was dying, I began praying for her again and decided to speak with her. She was in a very serious condition and did not respond for a long time. When she was able to talk, I set aside all my affairs and spoke with her for as long as she was able and desired.

From the very beginning of the conversation, I told her that I was not calling to bury her, but to gladden her heart, share something positive, and simply say something pleasant. She was surprised and delighted. Gradually, our conversation turned to Eternity. We agreed that we would be neighbors there, and later I asked Jesus for this in prayer. I also promised her that if her Eternal home was small, I would build a second story for her and invite the biblical patriarchs to help me. Anya laughed with joy like a child and understood that this was real and would happen very soon. We discussed a few more details of the future life, and I assured Anya that when the Lord laid her down to rest, the next moment she would awaken, and then at last we would meet, never to part again. Our conversation lasted about half an hour. Then Anya said that she was in severe pain and could no longer speak. I prayed, and we parted as friends.

Two days later, Anya was gone. When I received the news, I was surprised that I felt no regret and no sense of bitter loss. I

understood that this dear person had become even closer to me, and that her earthly suffering had ended forever. I felt such joy that I had managed to do something kind for her and that we had been able to make arrangements concerning something important.

Verses from the Bible about the death of the righteous came to mind. And the Lord gave comfort through the hope of a soon reunion.

Until her very last day, Anya wanted to do something for the Lord and serve Him in some way. When she learned that a house was standing empty somewhere, she decided to hold a health retreat there and give some of the guests hope for a better and healthier life. And I never ceased to marvel at how much a weak person can accomplish when relying upon the Lord and beginning to take action. I become a witness to the miracles of God's power and grace that accompany every work of God.

In one way or another, all of us will approach the boundary of life called death. Only those who meet Jesus while still alive will never know what it is. But I know for certain that whenever this boundary begins for anyone, at the first resurrection that person will not regret having failed to live long enough or enjoy all the pleasures of the world.

Anya will not regret for even a second that she left this world so early. She is not here now, but from her perspective, almost immediately afterward she is welcoming all of us with the joyful embraces of Eternal friendship and love. Then we will invite her to continue studying and learning the lessons through which she slept. I do not think she will object—especially since we agreed about this as well. I even promised to invite David and Solomon to her class.

Perhaps someone is reading all this and does not believe it will happen. It will. It most certainly will! And it will be far better and more interesting.

Do not think, my friends, that we will study something here until the Second Coming and then scatter in every direction.

The School of Agape Love must begin at some point in every person's life so that afterward it will never end.

Although Jesus Himself will teach us and reveal the mysteries of Eternal Life, and the Holy Spirit will inscribe God's love upon our hearts, human mediation and participation will also be needed in abundance.

What does our earthly life look like in the light of Eternal Life? It is a tiny drop of water in a boundless ocean. And what is more interesting to focus our attention upon: the drop of water, or the endless prospects of that limitless expanse of water with its unfathomable depths and unending revelations?

Yet some people cling so firmly to their drop of water and try to squeeze everything out of it that they make no attempt even to understand that another dimension of life also exists.

Love opens the doors to Eternal values that captivate the mind so completely that you understand the following: this world must become a springboard from which to plunge in headfirst.

The message to Laodicea shows us the prospect of an Eternal relationship with Jesus, which He counsels me to enter. I will never understand the fullness of what the Faithful Witness offers me until I set out upon the path of this mutual trade. And the most interesting part is that, as we buy all the treasures of the universe from the invisible God, we can use them to enrich both our own lives and the lives of those who, together with us, have decided to trade Eternally.

Before her death, my friend Anya enriched me so greatly with her positive spirit and her love of friendship that I very much want to share all this with you. Her sincere laughter, her kind words, and her unseen smile remain in my memory to this day and live within my heart.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Psalm 116:15; Revelation 14:13; Isaiah 57:1–2; 1 Corinthians 15:50–57; Ecclesiastes 2:12–17; 7:4; 9:4–10; Proverbs 17:17, 22; Ecclesiastes 11:8; Luke 11:34; James 3:18; Psalm 32:11;

97:12; 119:165; 133:1; Romans 12:15; Philippians 4:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:16.

## How Good It Is for Brothers to Dwell Together

The internet can very quickly bring together like-minded people from all over the world. If you desire it strongly enough, you can even become a Christian blogger and gain a target audience by offering people something useful and right.

Our School of Agape Love has become one of the channels of God's blessings on the internet for those who desire to study the Heavenly science of Agape and gain friends. Thirsting souls from all over the world have been gathered beneath God's wings. And we understand that behind every online participant stands a living person with his or her own distinctive qualities.

But online communication is unable to convey many beautiful feelings that can be expressed in a face-to-face meeting.

One day, a suggestion was voiced in our School as well: 'Let's meet!' We began anticipating the advantages of such a turn of events and assessing the situation. Why not?

As a meeting place, Brother Arsen offered his small home in Yerevan. He said that the accommodations for guests were not very good, but anyone seeking an exotic experience could come in September 2022. Surprisingly, a great many people responded immediately, undeterred by the crowded conditions or other adventures. The meeting announcement had to be removed because even the number of those who had already responded proved to be very large.

We had to take a step of faith and begin thinking about organizational matters. Making a suggestion is one thing; actually gathering together is another. But things had been set in motion, and we did not want to change or cancel anything.

The Lord saw our problem and moved the hearts of some of Arsen's acquaintances to let us use, free of charge for the duration of the meeting, a three-story house with every convenience.

Everything indicated that the meeting was meant to take place, and we began having interesting experiences in which the

impossible became real. Those who were initially not allowed to leave home asked us to pray about their circumstances, that the Lord would change the course of events and intervene in the matter. To our joy, we saw answers to our prayers arrive, and every path opened even for those who had been unable to travel.

Then the next step was taken: tickets were purchased, suitcases were packed, and we were on our way. There it was—Armenia! The meeting place for friends from the School of Agape Love.

Our anticipation of this meeting contained an element of mystery, because no one imagined what it would be like, what we were really like, or what awaited us within one another's personal space. But each of us decided to bring our own 'good' with us and share it with our online friends, who were now becoming real-life friends as well.

Upon arriving, we realized that we had entered Heaven—a little piece of the Heavenly Country about which we had dreamed for so long. Our cozy house became a branch of the Heavenly Kingdom in which the Lord placed all of us for the duration of our meeting.

I had never before seen so many happy people together within a single square meter.

Joy, delight, laughter, hospitality, and the desire to serve another person—all this became the customary atmosphere of our meeting. The desire to be happy and impart the same spirit to those around us became the norm and the unwritten law of our stay there.

'I feel as though I am still dreaming!' Statements like this could be heard quite often from many of those present. I myself also wanted to believe that it was not a dream. The reality was that here, beside one another, we were not merely doing well—we were doing exceedingly well.

'Hug therapy' became our morning greeting and a way to keep our spirits high throughout the day. Words of love, friendliness,

joy, and delight became so customary and natural that we no longer wanted to grow unaccustomed to them.

We ate twice a day, but each meal was such a beautiful celebration for both body and soul, and nourished both so well, that we wanted it to continue forever. During our meals, we partook not only of the gifts of nature, but also of one another.

This is how it worked. We sat down to eat at one table, prayed for God's blessing upon the food, and then chose the most delightful fresh friend and began to 'partake' of that person, savoring the taste of life within our hearts. One by one, we told each other what we liked about the chosen person, how wonderful that person was in Jesus, how many hidden treasures were within, and how joyful we were that this person was part of our lives. It was very interesting to observe those of whom we were 'partaking.' On the face of the listening 'food item,' one could see amazement, gratitude, and joy taking shape in response to the sincerity we gave while savoring our delightful friend.

We cannot describe in words all the joy that came from recognizing God's blessing and His presence in our relationships. But we were experiencing it then, and throughout our lives we will carry the memory of how simply we can have paradise on this Earth by creating it with our own hands and with love for one another.

Although there was not enough room for everyone to sleep comfortably, for the sake of the joy of our meeting and fellowship with one another, we were prepared to endure anything, if only we could remain within this blessing and be a blessing to others.

We understand that this world has prepared various trials for us in order to deprive us of Heavenly joy. But at that moment, we were thinking about what other good thing we could do for a friend so that our fellowship would bring that person joy.

We also experienced some amusing moments. After coming out of the forest, we did not know how we would get home. Then we decided that all of us would ride into the city in Arsen's car

and walk from there. Fourteen people fit into a five-passenger car. What we experienced during that time is difficult to describe in words. It seemed as though Heaven had opened in order to gladden our hearts. Even in such extreme crowding, we managed to sing the beautiful song 'The Mowers in the Meadow.' Getting out of the car was also amusing as we watched the astonishment of onlookers. After all, it is not customary for fourteen people to ride through Yerevan in one car.

How good it is for brothers and sisters to dwell together—in unity, in love for one another, in the desire to serve, and in the joy of fellowship! Trials and hardships will someday enter every life, but at that moment we were within the atmosphere of Heaven, imagining that we would experience something similar there, where our Dear Jesus is waiting for us and preparing a place for our Eternal joy.

All our joy in one another poured out in prayers of thanksgiving to our dear Lord, in enthusiastic singing, in our embraces, and in words of love. Heaven became so close and desirable, and all the glory for this belongs to Jesus.

When I read about the satisfaction with which He shall see the travail of His soul, I can already imagine it in part as I observe my friends who decided to enroll in the School of Agape Love and learn what they were now sharing so actively with one another. Even one day spent in such an atmosphere leaves a deep impression upon the heart. You see that someone in this world needs you, that people are sincerely glad to see you and glad that you exist, that you have people whom you love, and that they love you in return.

This is where our education in the School has led us. To our mutual amazement, we came to love one another. But this was exactly what should have been expected, because it was what we had been learning from the very first lesson. It would be surprising to see cactus sprouts growing where love had been sown.

How I wish there were more and more of us, and that all God’s people would buy and come to know what the Faithful Witness so graciously invites us to buy.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Psalm 133:1; Acts 2:1, 44–47; 1 Peter 1:22; John 13:34–35; 15:12–13, 17–19; Psalm 105:42–45; Nehemiah 12:43; Proverbs 8:28–31; Isaiah 35:10; 61:10; Jeremiah 15:16.

## God Is a God of Order

We read in 1 Corinthians 14:33: ‘For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace…’

A certain man received a supernatural spiritual gift and, under the influence of the spirit he had acquired, decided to organize his own church. He declared that it would have no rules, that people would receive absolute freedom and authority to act however they wished, and that their god would become their teacher, giving revelations to the congregation through its leader. This movement began to grow and, after some time, became quite large. Yet eventually, rules and standards of conduct still had to be introduced. When the pastor was asked why he had changed his mind, he replied that without organization and order everything falls apart, anarchy sets in, and people who have no law over them are forced to invent rules for themselves.

We live in a highly organized society in which every unit—from the state down to the family—is governed by its own rules, statutes, and laws. And all people in our world are subject to God’s principles of coexistence.

But every country has its own national characteristics of behavior and mentality, which may surprise us or even frighten us by their uniqueness.

Every gathering of people implies an order of conduct, a daily schedule, and rules governing relationships. If these are absent, people begin searching for boundaries, and those boundaries may differ from person to person.

God’s people, led by the Holy Spirit, receive instruction from above concerning how they should act, what they should obey, and whom they should listen to. All biblical laws become effective in the lives of those who permit God to write them upon their hearts. The presence of these statutes within my mind creates a particular manner of conduct, while taking into account the choice of my will and the direction of my desires.

But my desires remain my own, and my behavior and attitude toward others reveal who I am. My appearance, physical build, voice, manner of communicating, and behavior in a given situation—all this characterizes me as a person with a particular way of thinking, and throughout it all I remain myself.

Meeting and communicating with other people helps me understand what I am truly like, what motivates me, and what gifts and talents I possess.

But the most interesting part begins when people of different ages, views, and opinions gather together in order to know one another more closely. If such a community is united by Jesus, His law, and God's love, people gain the great advantage of being able very quickly to unite as one Heavenly family and love one another according to the commandment, without scrutinizing peculiarities of character. Love covers all things and makes such meetings richly blessed. All the lessons of agape that have been accepted into the heart and written upon the mind by God's hand come alive and become an effective power that moves the will with the desire to make another person's life better, more joyful, and happier.

The beginning of such gatherings looks very good and blessed. When meetings like these are held for the first time, every participant has certain expectations and plans for the event. The more people gather together, the more opinions and expectations there are. Although we are all united in the spirit of love, each of us is unique in our own way.

If no common order and daily schedule have been established for all participants, then whether I want it or not, a conflict of interests and expectations arises, immediately revealing the strong and weak aspects of my character.

The disciples of Christ, however, are distinguished by their willingness to show obedience and submit to one another in a spirit of love and respect.

God is a God of order in every gathering. When this order is absent, people develop a sense of anxiety and uncertainty. Each

person feels like a ship without sails, not knowing where to go next. This anxiety immediately begins to express itself through the more proactive people, who state their position firmly and ask that measures be taken to establish rules of conduct and a daily schedule. Sometimes the original plans for the meeting collapse when they encounter reality and are then modified according to the desires and opinions of the majority. But love covers all things and makes every change of plan joyful and good.

Any rules may be abused or may even violate a person’s will if they are approached with a demanding spirit and an insistence upon unquestioning compliance.

I remember my military service, when those assigned to company duty had to clean the barracks and then turn over the duty station with the room in a state of cleanliness and order. You never knew who would evaluate your work or how. Some accepted all your efforts without even looking at what you had done, while others ‘went around with a magnifying glass,’ finding dirt where no one else could see it. The following also happened: some officer would arrive and force us to clean a place that was already clean, desiring thereby to demonstrate his authority and importance.

A spirit of faultfinding and dissatisfaction is not welcome in any community. It provokes a response that will not be slow to appear and return to the demanding person in the same spirit. This leads to hostility or resentment and destroys relationships.

The School of Agape Love differs from the world in that it seeks a loving solution to every misunderstanding, trying to understand the problem and resolve it quickly. No other spirit is welcome in a community of friends who love one another, because any other spirit destroys peace and mutual trust.

When I begin covering my ambitions with biblical quotations about order and law, it resembles Adam and his wife covering their nakedness with leaves and thinking they were clothed. Only God’s love and the righteousness of Christ can truly present my sincerity and demands to a friend in the right spirit.

The rebellion in Heaven began at the moment when the anointed cherub decided to improve God's order and began introducing his own proposals into the Heavenly family 'for the common good.' Surprisingly, this spirit infected many innocent and trusting angels, who took Satan's side and supported him.

When my friend is living peacefully with me, but I consider him lazy or a violator of order, then introducing this version of my truth into his happiness is not the science of love. It is an entirely different spirit, one that can very quickly destroy relationships and infect trusting souls with dissatisfaction.

In love and friendship, we are all vulnerable, and many hearts have not yet become established in agape or learned how to receive unexpected blows and remain unharmed.

For me, unwashed dishes accompanied by love are better than sparkling cleanliness accompanied by indignation and faultfinding.

Friendly relationships are built over years and are very delicate. They must be carefully protected from every kind of damage, because a broken vase is difficult to glue together and restore to its original appearance. But love can repair even this.

God is a God of order in love and peace, even toward those who have not yet learned this order. To Him, our friendly interaction is more important than many of the outward things surrounding us. We should not cover our ambitions with God's name, making Him an accomplice in our actions performed in an unkind spirit. God is love, and He desires that I become this same love, united with Him in one spirit.

It is also worth noting that even if one of us has made a mistake in his demands, at that very moment he needs our love most of all, not our condemnation.

Bible Verses for Reflection

1 Corinthians 14:33; Proverbs 13:23; 29:18; Judges 21:25; Numbers 10:28; Isaiah 28:24–29; Luke 1:1–4; Acts 19:32; 2 Corinthians 12:20; 2 Thessalonians 3:1–3; Romans 12:9–11;

James 1:5–8, 16–21; 3:10–18; 4:17; Acts 4:32; 1 Corinthians 13:7; Proverbs 3:28; 4:1; Psalm 50:19–21; 1 Peter 5:5–7.

## Climbing the Mountain

In Armenia, not far from Yerevan, stands Mount Aragats, which rises 4,090 meters. Anyone who desires can climb this mountain without special equipment.

In September 2022, when the friends from our School gathered for a meeting, the program included a trip to the foot of this peak followed by an ascent.

We hired a bus that brought us to a high-altitude lake at an elevation of about 3,000 meters. The air temperature below was 26 degrees Celsius, while in the mountains it was 5 degrees. We received safety instructions, and then all of us began climbing the mountain together.

At first, our route was fairly gentle, and we set ourselves the goal of reaching a small patch of snow. As it later turned out, it was a sheet of white plastic spread upon the ground.

This was my first time in the mountains, and I was very interested in experiencing with my own hands and feet what it was like. I know many passages in the Bible that speak about mountains and about how our Savior often chose such places to receive or impart special blessings. He also counseled us to flee into the mountains. There is something special in this that is very difficult to explain but can be experienced.

The winds are strong in the mountains, yet at the same time it is very quiet. Majestic landscapes of pristine beauty fill the soul with awe before the Creator of everything around us. The boundless expanses amaze us with their natural harmony and grandeur. The higher the mountain, the fewer signs of life it bears.

When we reached the place where the steep ascent began, part of our group preferred to remain below, while ten people decided to climb higher. Although I was interested in reaching the summit, I wanted to stay with those who were falling behind and needed help. We all scattered across the surface of the

mountain, looking for easier routes upward. Eventually, my group and I came to a very steep slope and decided to climb it.

Mount Aragats looks as though someone poured out a heap of stones of different sizes. We climbed over them toward the summit without knowing what awaited us there. Although the air was thin, it was easy to breathe. Every twenty or thirty meters, we had to stop to catch our breath, regain our strength, wait for those falling behind, and take a few pictures. I greatly enjoyed helping those who needed it. It was so joyful to extend a helping hand and lift a friend upward while encouraging that person with cheerful words. Someone found it difficult to carry a backpack, so I had to take that burden upon myself as well.

We were climbing on the sunny side, and I advised everyone to remove their outer clothing so that they would not begin sweating too soon. Although a cold wind was blowing, the blood within us warmed our bodies. How joyful it is, when you are tired from climbing, to help those who are even more tired! No one refused my hand, and this gave me new strength. Halfway up, I understood that the main thing was not to reach the summit but to help my friends if they found it difficult. I even decided to remain with anyone who might be unable to continue. And my love for these people was with me. But my friends proved persistent and confidently crawled upward, never explaining to me what they thought they had left up there.

Our slope was very steep, and because of the rocks we could not see the finish, but by faith we moved forward and upward.

Although climbing requires great strength, you can see the entire surface in front of you and know where to place your foot and what to grasp with your hands. During a descent, it is more difficult to identify a safe place for your foot. It is the same in the spiritual life: it is easier to move upward toward God when you see before you the supporting stones of truth upon which you can plant your feet firmly and, having a solid foundation, pull others upward.

It was very important not to walk directly behind the person ahead, because the mountain has many loose rocks that can shift beneath someone's weight and fly down upon the heads of those following. Placing a foot poorly upon a rock could also result in a sprain or other injury. By God's mercy, all of us were preserved from such dangers.

With every step, the summit drew closer and closer. But I rejoiced in the closeness of my friends, who cheerfully crawled upward, maintaining a joyful spirit without hiding their weariness. Although I offered my help, they often declined politely, understanding that I was also carrying a load.

And there it was—the summit! The transition from the slope to the mountain peak was the most dangerous part, because it consisted of small flat stones upon which we could slide downward if we were not careful. We decided to crawl on all fours so that we would not expose ourselves to unnecessary danger. The Creator designed this mountain in an interesting way: He piled large rocks upon it and then covered the top with small stones upon which it was possible to walk safely.

Standing on the summit, each person could behold the beauty of God's world in every direction and understand what a wonderful Creator he has.

The mountain wilderness delights the eyes but does not fill the stomach. We took out our food supplies and ate them together. Those who had reached the very top before the others had become cold in the chilly wind. Some had headaches and others had stomachaches, but the Lord resolved these problems as well through remedies that our friend Arsen had prepared beforehand.

While standing at the very top, we saw a gentle trail leading downward, though in the completely opposite direction, and decided to descend along it. We divided into pairs and began returning to the bus. It was very far from us, approximately five kilometers away.

During the descent, we did not stop because going downward was easier. But in the mountains, one must not lose vigilance or

relax. Holding hands, we descended together, trying to maintain our balance and help our partners maintain theirs. Walking in pairs was easier and safer. Some moved faster, while others fell behind. But the gentle slope ended, and we began moving down a steep descent. Although it was easier and faster, it required greater attention and foresight. Those who had become frightened called me for help. They were frozen in place, not knowing what to do, because it turned out that some of them were afraid of heights. How joyful it was to feel like a rescuer and devise a way out of the situation! I had to explain every movement, hold my friend's hand firmly, and descend slowly. The presence of a confident companion gave courage to those who found it difficult and frightening. How joyful it is to help those who are weaker and need you! These were indescribable moments of happiness, because you were truly needed and in demand. After completing that descent and reaching a gentler slope, we no longer released one another's hands, understanding that danger could appear at every step.

Climbing and descending the mountain through difficulties and dangers made us even dearer and closer to one another. We returned with great joy. It was also amusing to find a place to use the bathroom in the open landscape. We had to turn away and wait for our friend again, understanding the need.

Darkness falls very quickly in the mountains, and we had to reach the parking area before sunset, because in the dark you cannot see where to step, and rocks are everywhere.

The Lord does not recommend that we expose our lives to danger unnecessarily. Climbs like this should not become the rule or purpose of life. But we have spiritual mountains that we are called to conquer, reaching the summit in order to know ourselves and our friends better.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Mark 3:13–15; 6:46; 9:2; Matthew 5:1; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1; 26:39; 28:16–17; John 6:3; 15:12–13; Philippians 2:4, 20; Revelation 14:1; 21:10; Psalm 24:3; 68:15–16; 121:1; Genesis 19:17–18; Exodus 19:20; Isaiah 40:9; Luke 21:34.

## In the Embrace of Love

During prenatal development, an unborn child is enclosed within a space that gently surrounds it on every side. The baby does not yet understand where it is, but it feels the warmth of touch, comfort, and peace within its little shelter.

After birth, the child is taken into loving arms and gently held against the chest. Warm hands stroke the baby's head, and this little person is kissed from head to toe. The baby calms down and very carefully stores within its memory all the pleasant experiences that fill its little heart and bring peace.

Receiving nourishment from the mother is accompanied by the tender touch of her hands, her wonderful scent, and the taste of that water of life which is so pleasant to draw in while listening to the sound of her quiet voice. Throughout all this, you are held in the loving embrace of love as your little body remains in someone's arms for a long time. It usually ends with the well-fed child falling asleep in that tender embrace, after which the baby may continue to be held or be placed in a crib nearby.

A person grows and experiences many different events in which he often needs the support of his parents, their tender embraces and gentle touch combined with kind words.

As a person matures, new interests enter life, displacing the language of touch and offering many new sensations. Yet somewhere in the subconscious remains the memory of how good it felt to be held in the warm, gentle arms of one's parents. But the parents now consider you grown and no longer want to pick you up without a reason. In this situation, stuffed animals are very helpful; it is so pleasant to press them to your cheek and embrace them while sleeping. But gradually this also passes. Older children are not supposed to take toys to bed or seek a cozy place on their mother's lap.

The years pass, but the memory remains. Our subconscious very carefully preserves every kind feeling and experience that brought us warmth, safety, and emotional satisfaction. If all this

were removed from us, we would cease to be human. We cannot travel very far on bare principle or enthusiasm alone.

I tried to imagine the Second Coming of Christ. All my deceased friends are resurrected, the living righteous gather from every corner of the Earth, and all of us receive new incorruptible bodies and rise together to one place, where the loving Jesus meets us. Angels bustle around us, reuniting us with our relatives and friends and bringing lost children to their mothers. We recognize one another in our new appearance. And how do you think we will express our joy at this wonderful reunion? I can imagine nothing other than the strong embraces of love in which we will enfold one another and then pass them on to the newly arriving saints. We will begin calling out to all our acquaintances and friends, who will be searching for familiar faces amid the universal rejoicing, so that we can open our tender arms to the souls dear to our hearts. And those to whom we were very precious will not want to release us from their arms and, in their joy, will hold us tightly.

The embraces of love will accomplish their good work, and not one person who has been given immortality will remain insufficiently embraced.

Then it will be the turn of the modest angels who, after reuniting us with our friends, quietly step aside to watch our happiness with joy. At some point in expressing our love, we will notice these thirsting souls as well and rush toward them together to enfold all of them in our friendly embraces. A tremendous noise and clamor, laughter and exclamations will rise upon the clouds, while our dear Savior looks upon us with satisfaction, expressed in a broad smile upon His beautiful face.

The following question arises: Is it worth waiting for all these events in order to experience the happiness of love’s embrace? Perhaps we should create a celebration ourselves and find those whom we can remind of this wonderful expression of love, which, although forgotten, is very familiar to everyone.

At one gathering of friends from our School, an unspoken decision was made to practice giving hugs. We call them

Vitamin ‘H.’ Many of those present had their own views about this activity, and some found it difficult to take the first step and embrace a friend. But it happened. A pathway to kind childhood memories was opened. Some of the sisters took this soul-gladdening practice so much to heart that they decided to spend their free time in one another’s tender embrace. Most interestingly, these prolonged embraces became like a healing balm for the soul. It was so joyful to hear people say that we were not on Earth but somewhere in Heaven. It was fascinating to observe the changes in the worldview of those who entered the embrace of love and gained new experiences, reviving the earliest lessons of love from their memories.

How pleasant it is to look at friends who, holding one another closely, listen with interest to what is happening around them without trying to escape their friend’s loving embrace, while giving their friend those same feelings in return.

Such embraces carry a deep healing power for the soul. A person comes into harmony with the love placed within him, which he can both give and receive. A circulation of love takes place within the nature of my heart.

Considering how pleasant it was to observe friends holding one another closely, I can imagine how much joy those friends themselves experienced.

An embrace has an interesting quality: you feel another person’s heart and can give that person your own heart. Any dislike or rejection is immediately conveyed to you through your friend’s arms. There can be no coercion in an embrace. It is one of the open expressions of free will. People experiencing something like this for the first time may feel a little shy and then, after thinking everything through, decide whether it should continue. It is important to respect the choice of those who decide that it is not for them and not attempt to act against their will.

It should also be taken into account that embracing a person of the opposite sex may cause ambiguous feelings and sensations that are unacceptable within Christian ethics. Therefore,

everything must be proper and appropriate to the place, customs, culture, and circumstances.

Although touch is not every person’s love language, each of us carries within the subconscious the first lessons of tenderness received in early childhood. A reminder of those experiences will bring many under-embraced people only benefit and healing from many emotional wounds.

I remember one person whom I decided to greet with an embrace. It turned out that I was the first and only person who dared to do so. How deeply his heart needed it! And during the following days of our meeting, he did not hide that need.

People who have not received enough embraces are very easy to identify. Hold them close to your heart a couple of times, and afterward they will always greet you with open arms. Such people surround us everywhere. They will never be the first to ask for an embrace, but subconsciously they are waiting for someone who will take the first step.

My arms can become God’s arms, through which He can heal the bodies and souls of those whom I meet and encounter. Laying loving hands upon someone while offering a prayer of blessing can become a channel through which healing Power from above is transmitted. Jesus very much desires to embrace you with my arms, my friend.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Isaiah 46:3–4; Luke 15:20; Mark 1:30–31; 10:13–16; Genesis 29:10–14; 45:15; 48:8–10; Ruth 4:16; Psalm 91:11–12; Ecclesiastes 3:5; Song of Solomon 2:5–6; Isaiah 49:22; 54:5–7; 66:12–13; Hosea 11:3; Romans 12:9–10; 1 Corinthians 13:1–3.

## Whom Shall We ‘Eat’ Today?

In one of the lessons, we considered the question of how delightful we are in the eyes of Heaven. I very much want to believe that this is exactly what takes place in the ‘Heavenly dining hall.’ But our bold imagination may embellish some things and leave others unsaid, so all that remains for us is to believe in what we are unable to see.

Yet we are surrounded on every side by very delightful friends who may not even realize how appealing they are.

All around me are treasure chests filled with precious minerals, and I can make use of all these riches if I begin searching for them carefully and discovering them both for myself and for my friend.

God’s image has been placed within each of us, but for some reason we do not think about it and sometimes do not even suspect it is there. Sin and the cares of life have covered us with a centuries-old layer of dirt, attempting to impose upon us the image of this world. But this should not be. We are not of this world.

The Lord desires not only to see His reflection in us, but also wants us to become treasure hunters and discoverers of God in the lives of our friends, our neighbors, and those whom Providence sends to us.

Long ago, I decided to treat my friends in such a way that I would see only what is good and beautiful in them and point out the most wonderful things revealed to me. It is not always possible to share such discoveries with a friend, but when you study the distinctive qualities of another person’s soul, you will certainly discover many fascinating qualities in that person’s individuality and character.

Every friend is beautiful. Within each of us is a part of God that has been placed into our earthly nature and needs to be discovered and developed.

In the past, I was surprised when friends said that they saw Jesus in me. This embarrassed me greatly, and I was ready to argue with them because I thought they were mistaken. But over time, I understood one simple thing: if I continually behold Christ, I begin to be transformed into His likeness. And if I am immersed in Jesus and allowed to become saturated with Him, what should flow out of me when I am pressed? I had to accept this verdict humbly and rejoice that this is indeed the case.

Interestingly, I also see Jesus in my friends—in their character, their love, and their tender attitude toward one another. In their modesty, they try to deny it, but I notice how God reveals Himself in them.

At the most recent gathering of friends, held in Yerevan, the spiritual program included an activity called ‘Eating a Friend.’ During a meal, we chose another delightful person from our gathering and began to ‘eat’ that person together.

What did this look like? A friend was presented to everyone at our shared table, and each person seated there had to speak about that friend, explaining what he liked about the person, what positive qualities of the soul had been revealed to him, and what was good in the person being discussed. Everyone else had to listen carefully to the speaker rather than engage in private conversations or various activities, while enjoying the flavor of the friend being ‘eaten.’ Fortunately, everyone present supported this initiative and, during the gathering, developed the gift of seeing what is beautiful in other people. By the end of the meeting, even the quietest and least talkative people had become very sociable and conversational.

Seeing what is beautiful in a friend, noticing the treasures of that person’s soul, discovering hidden talents, and speaking kind and tender words—all this is part of God’s plan for restoring His image within us. We cannot speak well of ourselves or praise ourselves; that would not appear very modest. But when another person shares with you and others what he sees within you and reveals the true beauty of your heart, you hear many amazing things about yourself that you may never even have suspected.

How delightful we all are, and how joyful it is to ‘eat one another’ in the good sense of the expression! How interesting it is to choose the next candidate ‘to be eaten,’ smile at that person’s embarrassment and request that we choose someone more delightful, and then watch the expression on the person’s face while hearing the finest truth about himself and about what a wonderful person he is.

We also noticed that many friends wept because of the abundance of kind words spoken about them. Some were experiencing this for the first time and were very glad that their suspicions that something good existed within their lives were confirmed by the words of friends, who uncovered the hidden treasures of their souls and shared these revelations with others as well.

All of us had gathered from around the world at one table—people of different characters, ages, and upbringings, yet possessing one faith and one Lord Jesus. Friction arose among us and could be felt very clearly at the beginning of a meal, when some were waiting for prayer while others were in no hurry to come to the table because they were attending to their own affairs. We sat down and began eating while tension hung in the air. But when another ‘eating of a friend’ began, God’s grace descended upon our gathering, and we united in a kind appreciation of another delightful person.

I think the most delightful experience took place within the heart of the person whom we were all ‘eating’ together. Personally, I delayed the moment when my turn would come, modestly trying to choose a brief time so that I could endure this attack more quickly. But they caught me as well and stretched the experience over two meals. I will be honest: it was very interesting and unfamiliar. My ears were not accustomed to hearing so many kind words about me, and I had to accept everything others said. I had never imagined what my friends saw in me, and many things interested me greatly. I understood that they valued me more highly than I valued myself, and now I very much desire to live up to the trust my dear friends placed in me. I saw what I had already achieved in

my life and where I should make an effort to preserve it. Everyone whom we ‘ate’ together at our table experienced these same feelings.

Do not let the word ‘eat’ trouble you. It contains a deep meaning. When I eat something, it passes through my inner being and becomes part of me. When I appreciate a friend or listen to kind words about that person, those words, like good seed, fall into the good soil of my good heart and begin growing there. They become part of me and bear an abundant fruit of love, joy, and peace in my relationship with the person about whom I have learned or spoken so much good. The ability to see goodness in people, notice their talents, and recognize the amazing qualities of their souls develops Heavenly qualities within my own soul and helps me understand how God sees me in our fallen world.

A pearl hidden in mud and stained by the filth of sin does not cease to be a pearl or lose its value, even if it is immersed in utter darkness. In the same way, each of us, born for God, has special value in the eyes of Heaven and contains many hidden talents that do not lie upon the surface but are revealed through careful study of a friend’s heart, with that friend’s consent.

During our gathering, we learned and put into practice—experiencing it personally—the most interesting lesson of love. In the future, it will help us see God’s image in people, their unique potential, and who they are in our eyes and in the eyes of Heaven.

Jesus desires to become my lips so that through them He may give weary souls hope, faith, love, inspiration, and healing.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Galatians 6:9–10; Philippians 4:8; Proverbs 27:2, 9–10, 14; Jeremiah 9:23–24; James 3:17–18; 2 Corinthians 6:3–10; 10:17–18; 12:9; Galatians 6:14; Luke 6:45; Colossians 4:6; Mark 9:35; John 13:34–35; 1 Timothy 1:5; Ephesians 4:29.

## Martha! Martha!

Communication is God’s gift to humanity, containing many advantages and blessings. It makes us human and gives us the opportunity to develop as we come to know ourselves and those around us. Words spoken aloud influence both those who utter them and those who hear them. Our communication shapes our relationships, and our relationships influence and shape our future communication with one another.

Personal meetings with people dear to you always have an advantage over online communication. And when you can also be a blessing to a friend and receive that friend as God’s blessing to you, such things greatly gladden the heart and fill life with special meaning.

One day, Jesus came to visit His friends. He especially valued the comfort of a friendly home atmosphere and had dear friends in this world who did not travel with Him but were always glad to welcome Christ into their home.

Martha began preparing a large meal. She could not imagine failing to feed her guests and took the full responsibility for this useful activity upon herself. Perhaps she knew recipes for delicious kosher food and began putting that knowledge into practice. But suddenly she realized that her sister was occupied with the wrong thing and was in no hurry at all to join her. Every hint and appeal for help was ignored. Martha could not accept such disorder and lack of organization, so she decided to state her opinion directly to the One Who could very quickly change the course of events. But to her surprise, she heard no words of support. Instead, she received a gentle reproof explaining that, in His eyes, her sister Mary was more blessed than the one who desired to prepare a large meal and send everyone away well fed.

We do not know how this story ended—whether Mary went into the kitchen or Martha sat down at Christ’s feet—but Jesus’ view of the incident was quite clear.

When the gathering of friends from our School was being planned, I dreamed mainly about the spiritual blessings and advantages of the gathering and completely overlooked the fact that we would need something to eat. In the simplicity of my heart, I thought we could make do with canned food, fresh fruit, and sandwiches, considering the spiritual program more important. But the reality of the situation revealed my incompetence in organizational matters, and we had to establish order and a duty schedule on the spot. Fortunately, by the third day, everyone accepted these rules with understanding.

I knew that all my friends would come to this meeting and that I was directly responsible for the gathering. Therefore, I prepared myself to communicate with everyone and enter into deeper relationships with people who had so greatly desired to see me in person. I was even prepared to sleep very little if only I could answer the questions and needs of those who wanted to speak with me. I understand that the program of our School is very intensive and requires additional answers in private.

To my surprise, the work in the kitchen and maintaining order in the house caused more concern and interest than what I wanted to share. Serious mistakes in the organization of our event were revealed, and within the resulting conflict I saw both strong and weak aspects.

The excessive sense of responsibility among those who placed order above everything else at the meeting introduced a spirit of division, and quick decisions had to be made in order to settle everything. I very much wanted to ease the worries and labor of the ‘Marthas,’ who worked like little bees for the common good. Yet my heart thirsted for fellowship with those who were interested in communicating more closely. I had to seek out such people myself and carefully guide the conversation while respecting the choices and interests of my friends.

The trip to the mountains showed that a great deal of time could be saved by preparing fruit and sandwiches. The

‘Marthas’ rested in body and soul, giving God the opportunity to feed us with the beauty of pristine nature.

From the experience of previous camp meetings, I noted that whenever we must prepare our own food, the kitchen becomes a battlefield where some people reveal interesting aspects of character that were not visible in other situations.

Kitchen wars are not welcome in Heaven. They represent the most improper spirit for relationships. The commandment to love one another also extends to every kitchen in the world as territory in which God’s Spirit should reign.

Taking this into account, I boldly took it upon myself to become the person in charge of the kitchen so that every test of my love would be directed toward me. Although I never actually became the person in charge, I was still able to practice love and teach lessons of meekness and patience.

It is very difficult for Martha to become Mary, because the excessive responsibility she has placed upon herself and her sisters prevents her from seeing the spiritual blessings she could receive together with the others if she laid down this burden.

To me, a plate of greens and an unwashed floor accompanied by love are far more valuable than an elegant arrangement accompanied by a revolutionary spirit. The use of force provokes a reaction that not everyone can accept, and misunderstanding follows—something only unconditional love can destroy.

Jesus established the priorities very clearly and showed Martha what He valued most and what would bring the greatest blessings in the future. Mary chose that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.

God permits many situations that reveal from every direction how strong or weak we are in certain matters. Even in the events described above, there were those who, like a rock, maintained a joyful spirit and were always ready to participate in any activity whenever there was a request or a need. A daily

schedule and duty roster resolved every conflict very quickly and brought peace.

It is written that the fruit of the Spirit is temperance. If Martha has prepared a large meal and placed this abundance before me, that does not mean she should be blamed for my overeating or lack of self-control. A table set with a variety of foods should not deprive me of my right to choose. I decided to eat what would not become a burden to me, even if someone considered my restraint disrespectful.

In the end, the entire gathering took place in a spirit of love and friendship. When we began ‘eating’ another friend during a meal, all the kitchen misunderstandings were forgotten, and God’s mercy enfolded us in the embrace of love and friendship. We immersed ourselves in the world of a delightful friend, seeking to develop within ourselves the wonderful ability to see every positive quality in another person. These abilities grew stronger in each of us with every new meal.

Love always and everywhere seeks opportunities to establish its banner and principles. No matter how difficult or unexpected the trials may be, a spirit of love and respect for a person’s choice helps us find the best solution to every problem.

Jesus loved Martha, and later He performed the most extraordinary miracle for her by raising her brother from the dead. We also should not forget that Martha is a member of God’s family who sees everything as life has taught her to see it, while the Lord desires to teach her what will never be taken away from her.

Although spending time with Mary may involve a brief fast, she provided greater nourishment for the soul. The heart of Jesus can also nourish today the soul of everyone who has something to share.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Luke 10:38–42; Romans 14:17; 1 Timothy 5:8; 6:6–8; John 6:55; 13:34–35; Proverbs 13:12; 15:17; Philippians 2:12–14; Jeremiah 29:11–12; 1 John 3:18; 4:7–8, 11, 21; 1 Corinthians 8:2–3.

## How Delightful Jesus Is!

At the gathering of friends held in Yerevan in September 2022, all of us came to know one another together, developing within ourselves the ability to see what is good and beautiful in another person. This activity was called ‘eating a friend.’ We chose another candidate ‘to be eaten’ and took turns expressing what we liked about that person. It was evident to everyone how the people being discussed shone with happiness and rejoiced within themselves at how delightful they were.

Friday arrived. At sunset that evening, we gathered around the common table to welcome the Sabbath. We wanted to sing and praise our God. Gratitude for our gathering, for the love among us, and for all the miracles of grace we had experienced—all this was expressed in prayers of praise to our dear Lord. Although our entire gathering resembled a day of rest, we welcomed the Sabbath in our customary way—with joy and simplicity of heart.

When the spiritual portion began after the singing and prayer, I suggested that those present ‘eat’ Someone very delightful. Silence settled over the room. Although coming to know one another was itself a blessed activity, we had gathered to glorify God, and therefore none of us wanted to draw attention to ourselves on this beautiful evening. I understood this as well and did not intend to focus our entire fellowship upon one person. I suggested, ‘Let’s “eat” Jesus now!’ Everyone looked at me in surprise. I asked each person to describe what he or she liked about our Savior, and I began by listing the good qualities of God’s soul that had been revealed to me during my friendship with Jesus.

You cannot even imagine how delightful our Lord is. We could spend an endlessly long time describing every good quality of His soul and lingering over the details of each characteristic.

The Bible tells us some delightful things about God. It reveals the beauty of God’s character, dwells upon the qualities of His love, and makes it clear that our Creator is exceedingly

beautiful and abundant in mercy toward His creation and toward every one of His sons and daughters. When you begin listing the qualities of Jesus' character that have been revealed to you and come to mind, and listen to similar testimonies from your brothers and sisters, you understand how great our Heavenly Friend is in His love for all of us. And how many invisible things He does for us! Every second, He protects us from every evil and pours unseen blessings upon His dear children.

According to Arsen, the house in which we held our gathering was located in the most crime-ridden district of Yerevan. We were warned to be very attentive and careful whenever we left the house. Yet three days after our arrival, while we were standing outside the house, one of the local crime bosses approached us and assured us that we were his guests. If we experienced any problems with other residents of the neighborhood, we were to give them his name and say that we were visiting him. Fortunately, we did not have to make use of this man's kindness, but I noted the following for myself: when your ways please the Lord, He makes even the enemies around us to be at peace. We believe that the Lord provides us with the best and most reliable protection, although at times He even uses crime bosses for this purpose.

Our Sabbath welcome continued at length as we reflected and testified about the wonderful Friend we have in our lives—how beautiful our Savior is, how wonderfully and many-sidedly He reveals Himself to each of us, and how fascinatingly He manifests Himself within every good soul. If we carefully examine all the beautiful qualities of our souls and then compare them with Jesus, we can confidently declare that every good quality within us is certainly present in Him as well, only in a more perfect form. This leads to the conclusion that none of the goodness we possess within ourselves or see in one another is truly our own. It is given to us by the One Who is altogether lovely and the Chiefest among ten thousand. Song of Solomon 5:10, 16.

As I listened to my friends describe how delightful Jesus is, I understood that I also saw everything they saw, and that only because of Him do we all become delightful to one another. He is our salt, our fire, our sweetness, and our inspiration. Everything good within us comes into being through Him, and nothing delightful becomes delightful without Him. In essence, it is not we ourselves, but He within us, Who makes us beautiful, kind, holy, and very delightful. We need only immerse ourselves in the One Who is all in all and become saturated with Him to the deepest and most distant rhythm of the heart, so that afterward we may give those around us the beautiful flavor of life that Heaven has given us forever.

This is why Jesus asks us to love one another, so that within this love we may delight in Him—in the qualities of His beautiful soul, the flavor of His Eternal Life, and the fragrance of His unconditional agape and friendship—while also bringing joy to our Heavenly Father.

The Lord is glorified when we bear much good and delightful fruit with which to nourish all the people and friends around us.

Jesus is very delightful within us, but He is most delightful in a close and direct relationship with each one of us. Taste and see for yourself. Nowhere will you find a more faithful, close, kind, and gracious Friend. He will never tell anyone your secrets. He will always understand you when you sincerely come to Him in repentance, for help, or with some important matter. He is never so busy that He has no time for me. At any moment of the day, Jesus is always near, ready to participate fully in all my plans and needs. He respects my freedom of choice and does not prevent me from living, even if I choose the wrong path. Yet He does not remain silent, but very gently points out my mistakes and offers something better. How joyful it is to plan anything with Him! He is the finest Specialist in everything that exists. He understands the structure of the universe down to the smallest detail and perfectly comprehends the nature of each one of us, from the soul to physical health.

Jesus has a plan for every person, and this plan agrees so completely with my abilities, tastes, and desires that when I

joyfully receive it from God, it seems as though I am fulfilling my own dreams. My heart thanks the Lord for such mercy toward me and for His wisdom.

The most wonderful thing we can receive from Jesus is contained in His counsel to Laodicea in Revelation 3:18. We are offered an Eternal relationship with the entire Heavenly Family and the possession of all the blessings of Heaven. We never even dreamed of this.

How delightful it is to ‘eat’ the One Who is the Most Delightful! Our evening meal began with remembering the goodness we receive from Him, and it will never end, because everything we tasted that evening continues to live within us, bear fruit within us, and nourish our bodies and minds with new discoveries of the beauty of God’s character.

Do you like Jesus? Do you know how delightful He is? Can you share this flavor with your friends and cause them to fall in love with this feast? Are you drawn to try once again and taste the One Who is so good to us? ‘O taste and see that the LORD is good.’ Psalm 34:8.

Bible Verses for Reflection

John 17:3; Exodus 34:5–7; Psalm 34:8; Isaiah 9:6; Song of Solomon 1:15–16; 5:10–16; 8:14; Isaiah 40:11, 25–29; 41:9–14; 42:8; 43:4, 11–13; 44:2–3, 7–8, 24–28; 45:11–12, 23–24; 46:3–4.

## A Night of Prayer

Prayer is the most mysterious activity in the life of every Christian, yet many people very often neglect it. Through prayer, we gain access to all the blessings of Heaven that have been prepared for us but patiently await the decision of our will and the expression of our faith that we need Heavenly blessings.

We do not see the One to Whom we address our prayers or hear His voice, but we believe that He exists, that He hears us, and that He answers all our requests.

I cannot imagine how God answers my prayers, but by faith I rely upon the fact that He does.

Prayers may be of different kinds, and therefore their answers also differ. Let us list some types of prayer:

prayers of thanksgiving, intercession, praise, blessing, dedication, healing, wisdom and guidance, deliverance from evil forces, receiving special blessings, and calling upon God to fulfill His promises. In every case, faith is the foundational principle without which it is impossible to expect any answer.

God has power over many forms of care for His creation that He has built into the order of our world and sustains independently of our faith and prayers. But there are blessings for which we must ask and even plead.

When the gathering of students from our School was being planned, the program included an extended time of united prayer. The model for this prayer was taken from the life of the patriarch Jacob. When his life was threatened, he spent the night asking God to protect his household, and toward morning he pleaded for a special blessing for himself as well. It was a night of prayer during which God Himself came to His servant and wrestled with him until morning.

With such a biblical story as our guide, we decided to hold a shared night of prayer one evening. This was announced in advance, even before our gathering began, and then prayerful

preparation continued during the meeting itself. Every morning, we read and reflected upon the importance of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and upon how and why we need this Heavenly Gift.

We had no experience conducting such an event, so we asked for wisdom from above in order to understand what we needed to do. We did not know how God would answer, but we believed that He would.

We did not set a specific date, but waited for a favorable opportunity when, rested and alert, we could begin carrying out this plan. Yet every evening we saw the same picture: everyone was tired and needed rest. Therefore, we kept postponing our night of prayer until later. But that ‘later’ never arrived.

After another group trip to an interesting place, we returned to our house, and I announced to all my friends that the night of prayer would take place that evening. Everyone who desired could participate by going with us outdoors into a nearby forest. Nine people responded. The others decided to rest for a while and join us later, but after resting, they preferred to hold the service in the house.

While we were walking to our place of prayer, an interesting event occurred along the way. A car with open windows stopped beside us. The driver turned the radio up to full volume, and we heard the words, ‘Today you will be happy.’ Then the driver quickly turned off the radio and drove away. We found it interesting to consider what this might have been. Everything about the weather and nature disposed us toward prayer.

We chose a small forest near the television tower on a mountainous elevation above Yerevan. When we arrived, we spread out our camping mats, knelt down, and began planning the prayer itself. It was decided that everyone could choose his or her own posture for prayer. If someone was unable to remain awake, that person could sleep and refresh the mind. We would pray in turn for as long as the heart of the person praying

directed, wait for the prayer to end, say ‘Amen,’ and pass the opportunity to the next person.

We decided to begin the prayer by repenting before one another. Each of us offered quiet personal prayers to Heaven and then spoke publicly about what had been revealed. I asked forgiveness for my lack of organization and for other things. In turn, each of us repented before the others of what had been revealed to the heart. Afterward, we sang a hymn and began reading biblical truths about the importance of persistent prayer and receiving the power of the Holy Spirit.

We took turns praying, singing, and reading biblical promises. Then we prayed again according to those promises, pleading for what God had promised and assuring Him in our prayers that we needed it.

At first, we prayed for wisdom, then for the gift of the Holy Spirit, and afterward we asked to be given the spirit of persistence described in Jesus’ parable. Then we began expressing our faith that we had received what was promised and thanking God for an answer we had not yet experienced. The night grew cold, and we began to freeze. Someone lay down in exhaustion to doze for a while. But the prayers did not cease.

After completing a round of prayer, we chose an appropriate hymn, sang it, and continued praying. Not far from us stood the television tower, shimmering with different lights and faintly illuminating our place of prayer. When we had become thoroughly cold, we decided to go up to the observation platform and continue our prayers there. From that place, we could see the sleeping city, and once again we lifted our prayers to God.

To our surprise, a warm, gentle wind began to blow, tenderly surrounding us with its warming currents. We saw this as a sign from God, reminding us of the Bible passage about the still, small voice in which the Lord would be revealed. We continued praying for the Holy Spirit and for a blessing upon our gathering and upon everyone who was not with us.

Throughout our prayer, I struggled all night against drowsiness and wondered why it would not leave. When I began noticing that my mind was shutting down even while I stood, I decided to sleep for a while. I lay down upon the rocks and instantly fell asleep. About an hour later, I awoke and rejoined my praying friends.

Toward morning, we noticed that the entire forest below stood still, while the trees at the place where we had begun our night of prayer were swaying in the wind. It was an amazing sight.

Dawn was approaching. My friends shared the blessings they had received in answer to our prayers, while I had nothing to say and felt ashamed that I had slept through the most interesting part. It was decided that we would go home, but I said that I would not leave because I also wanted to receive an answer. Sister Sveta remained with me, while Arsen drove the others home. Then he returned to us, and we continued praying until eleven in the morning.

God gave me peace within my heart and assured us of His presence.

During our prayer, as I listened to Svetlana’s words, it was revealed to me that kneeling before me was a prayer partner whom the Lord was giving me. How joyful this discovery was! I shared it with Sveta, and we continued praying, declaring to the Lord that we would not let Him go until He blessed us. We did not know what the answer would be, so we prayed, believed, and waited.

Between our prayers, Arsen read quotations from the book Prayer, and as we listened to the inspired thoughts, we continued praying according to what had been read.

The Lord abundantly blessed all of us through this nighttime experience of prayer.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Genesis 32:24–28; Matthew 18:18–20; 26:40–41; Luke 6:28; 11:5–13; 18:2–8; Mark 13:32–37; Isaiah 44:3; Acts 1:4–5;

Romans 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13; 5:17; Hebrews 11:6; Jeremiah 29:11–13; James 5:16; Colossians 4:3.

## The Purifying Fire of Love

We are studying in an interesting School with an unusual name. If anyone thinks that nothing is happening among us and that we are wasting our own time and the time of others, read the name of our School carefully. It is exactly what it says: we are learning to love. For some, this process moves quickly; others do not understand what is supposed to happen or how it will all end. But the Lord does not keep us in one place. He leads us toward amazing discoveries as we come to know one another.

I want both to assure you and to warn you that, as you learn to love one another with agape love, someday you will receive everything for which you studied and spent your precious time learning this science. The School of Agape Love does not end when this love itself is acquired. Instead, it moves into a new stage of relationships that contains many different revelations and trials.

The Lord gave us the commandment to love one another. He stated it three times without changing the meaning of love, but adding distinctive qualities of the relationships within it. Then the time comes when I decide to begin obeying this commandment and find a friend for this purpose who does not object to loving me according to the same command of God. Not everyone will dare to take such a beautiful step, and I will not choose just anyone for the role of a friend whom I am to love with agape. Saying it is easy, but finding the person and doing it are entirely different matters. However it may take place, God’s blessing and approval must rest upon everything.

It is good when two brothers love one another and begin growing in that love. Likewise, if two sisters decide upon unconditional love, such a relationship will cause no misunderstandings and will be regarded as normal. Yet the commandment to love one another places no restrictions upon us according to sex. Obeying Christ’s command has the following feature: a brother must love a sister, and a sister must love a brother. But what about Christian ethics? And what will such love look like?

My friends, I want to assure you that when you decide to enter this path, you will certainly come to the necessity of loving someone who is unlike you and represents your complete opposite, yet agrees to mutual love.

When I purchased my first smartphone, I immediately appreciated its advantages for carrying out many kinds of work and activities that I had previously tried to handle with a computer, camera, basic cell phone, and other devices, spending a great deal of time and money. One day, a moment came in my life when I realized that certain social networks were stealing my best time and drawing me deeper and deeper. I was being offered a world of friends along with every kind of entertainment and pleasure, all enticing me through their easy availability. At some point, I realized that the smartphone had begun manipulating my will, luring me into places I should not enter. I greatly disliked this. I decided to execute my phone and render it unusable. But the Lord prevented me from carrying out this foolish decision, impressing upon me that the problem was not in the phone but in my head. I would not become a victor by breaking an expensive item. I would have to buy a new one, because our modern lives are connected to this device, which makes everyday living easier in many ways. Victory consists in learning, while carrying such technology in my pocket, to use only those advantages that bring benefit and blessing, while rejecting everything that steals time and pollutes the purity of my thoughts. In this struggle, I must prevail.

I liked this approach and decided to watch what the smartphone was doing in my life and which one of us was controlling the other. It worked. Although my carnal nature sometimes draws me toward the garbage dump, I plan my time and interests in such a way that I do not enter dangerous territory, and I remove every temptation from my field of vision.

Within church fellowship, friendship and love between people of the opposite sex are governed by certain rules that are important to know and not violate. There are also stereotypes by which we are accustomed to orienting ourselves, considering

them the norm of life. But when I decide to keep God's commandment and choose a person of the opposite sex for this purpose, whether I want it or not, I invite the fire of trials into my life, and my chosen friend experiences the same thing. Everyone who desires to love one another must pass through this fire. The Lord will not shield us from this interesting trial, but He is ready to be with us so that the flame does not scorch us.

When, as a married man, I choose a sister as a friend and we decide to love one another, we open our hearts to this mutual agape, which is not like what is shown in movies, but is very deep and intense. I enter a world of new experiences that shatter all my previous ideas about friendship and reveal a new beauty and depth of relationship that I never even dreamed of. Agape teaches me to love genuinely and wholeheartedly. This same love also passes through the heart of your friend and produces the same effect. In any other case, it is not agape but something human or incomplete. I understand that the Lord is showing me the unknown, and the only thing I desire is to preserve the purity and holiness of the relationship, not allowing the flesh to raise its repulsive head in order to seize control of my will.

At some point, I become afraid and understand that the fire is very hot and unquenchable. I cry out to the Lord for protection, ask Him to be with me, and deeply desire to run away from all of it. But I understand that love bears all things and bears them rightly. The Lord desires to see me as a victor within the fire, not among the curious spectators.

If I plan to love my friend without having any feelings toward that person, it is unclear what kind of future I am imagining for myself.

Many times I have witnessed fellow believers violate the seventh commandment. This strengthened my conviction that friendship and love between a sister and a brother could not exist. But the Lord reveals the true picture. He teaches that genuine agape must exist between His children, but it must be

right, with God’s throne and the Lord’s principles at the center of the relationship.

The fire of agape love does not burn me; instead, it cleanses my heart from carnal and lustful desires. I learn to love my friend, enter the fire of this love, study and observe every process, and rejoice in and enjoy new discoveries and experiences.

Love shows me the nature and character of my friend. Within that person’s open heart, I see such an abundance of inexhaustible treasures that I immediately hurry to tell my friend about them. In turn, my friend shares with me the blessings discovered within me.

Honest communication about our new feelings and experiences helps us analyze what is happening, pray for one another, and make wise decisions concerning the next steps in our love.

Reading about someone else is very simple and interesting, but when this fire is burning within you, it is an entirely different perception of life.

My love for my wife did not diminish when a friend who loved me appeared in my life. Over time, there are more and more of these friends, and all of us love one another. And this is beautiful!

Bible Verses for Reflection

Isaiah 43:2; 1 Peter 1:22; 2:17; 4:8; John 13:34–35; 15:12–13, 17–18; 17:26; Revelation 3:17–18; Jeremiah 32:3; Matthew 24:12; 1 John 3:16; 4:7–13; Romans 5:5; 12:9; 1 Corinthians 13:4–8; 16:14; Galatians 5:13, 22–23; Ephesians 4:15.

## The Beauty of a Friend's Heart

'God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.' 1 John 4:16. The Lord loves His creation and tenderly cares for it. Even the most evil people are not deprived of God's love: their hearts continue to beat, and showers of blessing do not cease to water their lives. But does a sinful person see such care and love toward him? Does he fall upon his knees, moved and joyful because God loves him? Unfortunately, we see persistent indifference toward the Giver of life and an insatiable desire to receive His generosity and blessings.

Answer the following question honestly for yourself: 'Why are you waiting for Christ? Is it because you are tired of the evil in this world, or because you love Jesus?' Try to remember this question and ask it of yourself every day.

There is something beautiful in love that goes beyond conventional thinking. You love because it is right and because life is more interesting that way. In the light of love, every person appears quite unusual, and many good qualities of the soul are revealed to you—qualities skillfully concealed beneath an outward show of importance. God always loves every person unconditionally. But who among humanity rejoices in such treatment and thinks about his Heavenly Father? Who is inspired by God's constant agape? And how do people respond to the words, 'God loves you'?

Yet changes begin taking place in the thinking of people who are indifferent toward God when they see human love directed toward them, hear kind words spoken to them, feel gentle touches, and receive useful gifts. All this stirs their minds, and they try to understand what is happening. God's love, expressed through a human being, becomes visible and tangible, and many are willing to receive it, obtaining the fullest possible blessing from such treatment. Usually, however, they do not thank God but give glory to His messengers. Yet the Lord is ready to continue bestowing gifts upon His creation through the hands of those who desire to become channels of His love.

All of us who live and breathe upon this Earth are God's creatures and belong to God by right of creation. But among us are His children, who have been born of the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ. They are a special people called the children of God and possess an extraordinary status in the eyes of Heaven. These distinctions should not be erased. God's love for all people is unconditional, but His sons and daughters receive special blessings from above because they are God's children. Yet they do not always understand the care and love of their Heavenly Father toward them. This is why we were given the commandment to love one another.

Heaven expects each of us to understand Christ's commandment concerning our mutual love. There can be nothing blameworthy in such relationships, because we are speaking about the Lord's clear command. Yet for some reason, to many of God's children this commandment is always new, or they simply do not know it even though they remember that it exists.

To love one another is a mutual, conscious agreement to have an unconditional, kind, reciprocal relationship with each other. A one-sided relationship is also love, but it is not loving one another. It is more like a one-way street where you cannot drive back and no one is coming toward you.

If the miracle of transformation takes place in my life and I receive the gift of love from above, that does not yet mean that I have fulfilled Christ's commandment to love one another. For this, I need a friend who loves in the same way, or at least someone who does not yet love me but, like me, desires to obey God. The greatest joy and a beautiful event occur when these two loving, solitary hearts meet and begin to love one another.

I cannot fulfill Christ's commandment casually or in passing. Simply telling someone that you love that person and hearing the same in response is not loving one another; it is an exchange of kind words.

To love one another is a conscious decision by two people who understand that they now belong to one another within this

love, and that their lives have become intertwined in one united agape with shared points of connection. This is not a marriage union, but the desire of two hearts belonging to God to unite in mutual love, together with their mutual consent to the deep and unending development of the relationship that follows. From childhood, all of us dream about such love and wait for it throughout our lives, thinking that it is worth giving everything to obtain it. But what am I doing in order to receive it? The Faithful Witness counsels me to buy from Him this wonderful gold of Heavenly origin.

Love for one another calls me to open my heart to my friend and calls my friend to open his soul to me. This does not mean that I will immediately see everything and discover all the treasures of my neighbor's soul. It means that from now on we will be able continually to discover the beneficial qualities of our hearts within one another and share these findings with each other and with the people around us. This is an Eternal process of Eternal discoveries of one another. This is why Eternity is given to us: so that we may learn at least a little about how beautiful and amazing we are within, containing countless treasures of good qualities in the depths of our hearts.

In our love for one another, we comprehend the power and depth of this agape. But this does not mean that such knowledge encloses us within a closed union of two loving hearts. As we learn to love one another, we gain Heavenly knowledge of this love and become able to share it with others, passing on to those around us the experience of our relationship that was born through the practical exercise of our love for one another.

God desires to see this kind of love within our families as well. But at times families are formed to unite bodies without any desire to know the heart of one's companion. Even this can be corrected if both people make a mutual decision to love one another within the family and each does everything necessary on his or her part.

Love for one another opens many possibilities for serving God in a spirit of love. We unite in prayer and ask for many things. When we are joined in this union, Jesus' promise begins to operate in relation to us: if two shall agree in asking concerning any matter, the Father will answer them. Matthew 18:19. A friend's love becomes an additional source of inspiration and support for me. Even when a friend is physically far away, that friend's kind words can perform real miracles in my life. We become God's blessing to one another, enriching one another and adding no sorrow with it.

Love for one another is the great mystery of fellowship between two loving hearts, which can be understood only from within the relationship. The depth of such agape is covered by God's hand, and no outsider can uncover the inner world that unites friends within their mutual love.

We do not need to wait for the Second Coming before beginning to keep God's commandment. Eternity has already begun through our faith in Jesus, and our love for one another reveals to us all the beauty of those Heavenly relationships of the distant future that we can experience today, here and now.

Whatever wonders I may discover within my dear friend, I see all of them in my precious Jesus as well. It is He Who has been given to me within the heart of my neighbor and given to my neighbor through me. Within our agape for one another, we give everything to the Lord, from Whom we received it all, returning it to Him in a spirit of love and gratitude.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Proverbs 17:17; 1 Corinthians 16:14; John 13:34–35; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 5:21–22; 2 Thessalonians 3:5; Jeremiah 31:3; 33:3; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 Timothy 1:5; Colossians 3:14; Philippians 1:8–11; Ephesians 3:18–19; 4:15; Galatians 5:6; 1 Corinthians 13:12–13; Song of Solomon 5:10.

## Victory in Communication

The Lord has endowed each of us with the gift of communication. From childhood, we are taught our native language, in which we can freely express our thoughts and feelings and understand what we hear from those around us.

Because we possess reason and the ability to analyze, we receive the gift of distinguishing good from evil. Our will can make a conscious choice, preferring the path of life and the direction of thought formed under the influence of my surroundings.

The Lord created us for Himself and, at the same time, gave us to one another. Although sin separated us from God, the Lord did everything possible to bring us back to Himself and reveal His love to us.

When I understand that God exists and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him, I begin communicating with Him. Within this fellowship, I receive everything necessary for the salvation of my soul.

Communication is the ability to express your thoughts and plans while also understanding the plans and statements of those with whom you speak. It is an opportunity to exchange actions in relation to one another, accepting or rejecting what is offered to you. Without communication, we cannot be human.

Communication with God involves exchanging plans, knowledge, and abilities, waiting for what has been promised to be fulfilled, and bringing my goals into harmony with God’s will. God does not enter into a dialogue with me in the commonly understood sense of the word. Our conversation takes place through my prayers and my appeals to Him concerning various matters. He speaks with me through His written Word, through my conscience by means of the Holy Spirit, through inspired people who left their writings to the world, and through those around me who are receptive to the Lord’s voice.

Through fellowship with God, I learn about many advantages of the spiritual life, understand my mistakes, receive an opportunity to repair what has been broken and destroyed, obtain what I could never acquire on my own, and much more.

In prayer, I express my faith and love toward my Savior, tell Him about my plans, share my thoughts and desires, and receive an answer concerning everything.

Christ's commandment that we love one another contains a special plan for the time of the end. Through this very love, the Lord desires to dwell within us and within our communication. Christ's disciples lived for more than three years with the One Who is Love, yet they never learned to love one another. Jesus had to draw special attention to this in the commandment He gave before His death.

It should also be noted that the command to love one another was revealed to a small circle of dedicated people among the disciples, who were united by the love of Christ. The Lord could have given this commandment somewhere in the street, but He did not. Friendship with people of a different spirit was not part of God's plan. Although He calls me to be friendly toward everyone, only those who love Christ and have fellowship with Him can possess love for one another. Even if your brother bears the name of Christ but does not possess His Spirit, he will not answer your love with love. He simply does not know how and will not do it. This is the distinction of loving one another: only the disciples of Jesus can possess it, and by this sincere agape everyone will know that Christians are followers of the Lord.

Love for one another involves our mutual communication, in which we open our hearts and allow the other person to enter the depths of our soul that are inaccessible to the rest of the world.

Within such communication, we find points of connection, discover sharp corners, define forbidden territories, and uncover immeasurable deposits of the soul's treasures that had been buried beneath mountains of fears and stereotypes. Love

knows how to discover everything beautiful within a friend and joyfully bring it into the open, surprising the friend with the unusual nature of its discoveries.

The friend with whom I have decided to love one another becomes for me an unexplored planet which I begin studying from every direction. The dedicated heart of another person is a beautiful platform for exchanging spiritual values, blessings, revelations, and experiences. We search for new treasures within one another and find them so that together we can rejoice in these wonderful discoveries. Our receivers of communication are tuned to the same frequency. We listen to and hear one another. We understand speech in the language of the heart. Even unfinished phrases are understood from half a word.

At some point in our friendship, we decide to speak about our love for one another. Our minds are not yet accustomed to such conversations, but we take this step, trying to understand what is happening within us and between us. In order to be honest with one another, we agree to share everything taking place within the heart, even what is bad, so that there will be no misunderstandings between us. Knowing that your friend is telling you the pure truth, you can see the whole picture of love and friendship as it truly is, without speculation or distortion.

Sincerity and openness in communication produce mutual trust, and it becomes easy to admit a friend into places no one else may enter. We also have an agreement not to share with other people confidential information about a friend that is available only to us. The only Person with Whom I can discuss my friend and reveal every secret of that person’s heart is Jesus. My other friends should know nothing from our private communication. It belongs only to my friend and me.

But our friendship also has open blessings that I gladly share with others. These include stories about the wonderful person the Lord has given me, how He taught me to love that person, and how many beautiful qualities of the soul I discovered within this friend who is dear to me.

As we tell one another about our love, we begin to know and understand from within how deep this love is, how it binds us together, what thoughts and feelings it produces, and from what Source it proceeds. We also share what the enemy of the soul tries to impose upon us and how dangerous it is to listen to his whisperings.

The breadth and depth of our knowledge of one another do not come all at once. They are revealed gradually, day by day, illuminating the beauty of our hearts more and more brightly. All this is so unfamiliar and unusual! At times, fear arises over whether everything is right within our love for one another. We immediately seek counsel from God in order to understand whether we are standing upon a dangerous path and ask Him to lead us in the way everlasting.

Communication with one another helps reveal many dangers while they are still in their infancy and enables us to gain victory before temptation arrives. Openness and trust help us share immediately with a friend the doubts that have entered the mind. Together, we can resolve all these matters very quickly in the best possible way. As a result of our love for one another, we begin to love one another out of a pure heart, knowing whom we love and why.

Love for one friend does not prevent me from loving another friend, or someone whom the Lord will yet give me. I use the experience gained in my relationship with my first friend when communicating with my other friends as well. We do not hide this from one another or become jealous, but rejoice that our spiritual family is growing and developing.

It is difficult to take the first steps when you do not know what is right or where to go. Communication with one another and with God sheds light upon our friendship, and we confidently do and try what will lead us to the complete victory of love within us. We are no longer afraid to love and give happiness, and we move forward.

Bible Verses for Reflection

1 John 1:7; John 13:34–35; Proverbs 10:22; 13:20; 17:17; 18:24; 21:10; 22:24; 27:9, 17; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 15:33; Philippians 1:6–11; 2:1–2.

## The Lord in Our Love

Can a family be formed without God's blessing? Yes, but it is better with His blessing. Can food be eaten without prayer? Yes, but it is better with prayer. Can you arrange your life without God? Yes, but with God it is safer and more interesting. Can you inherit Eternal Life without faith in Jesus Christ? Yes—but only if you add the prefix 'im-' to make it impossible. Can you build an Eternal relationship with someone without God? You can call it that, but it will be an earthly and temporary relationship.

If we imagine Eternity without God, it would be unceasing darkness and anguish of spirit. Fortunately, such a thing is impossible.

Many times I have watched families being formed as newlyweds declare their consent to become husband and wife. First, according to the law of the country, they make this declaration at the civil registry office. Then, if they desire, they ask for God's blessing upon their marriage before their church, making marriage vows and promises of marital faithfulness to one another.

After such ceremonies, two people are declared husband and wife, and society regards their union as a family with all the resulting rights and responsibilities.

But why is it necessary to ask for God's blessing upon the union of two people? They love one another, and everything is going well. I know Uncle Vanya, who lived happily with Aunt Anya without God, and they lived in perfect harmony. Why is a church wedding necessary?

Someone else has decided that there is no need even to form a family, because the main thing is to love one another. Therefore, they can live together without registering the marriage. It is enough briefly to inform God of their intentions, although even that is generally unnecessary.

I think believers immediately recognize the trap within these questions and statements. In regard to marriage, it is customary within the church community to arrange everything with God's blessing. And this is right.

But what about friendship and love? I desire to have a friend, but I do not have one. I ask the Lord to send me such a person, and the Lord answers. Someone who is after my own heart appears in my life. I may receive this friend immediately, or I may wait for years. But now the person has appeared and has become my friend. What comes next? Do we go and ask for God's blessing upon our friendship? Do we make solemn vows before the entire church that we will be faithful friends until death separates us? I have not yet experienced such a miracle of friendship. Imagine what it would look like! Two brothers come onto the platform, or a brother and a sister, or two sisters, and the pastor solemnly asks before the entire congregation: 'Dear Brother Vanya, do you agree, in joy and in sorrow, in health and in sickness, in poverty and in wealth, to take Brother Petya as your friend and love him throughout your life until death separates you?' After both answer, 'Yes. Yes!' they are declared lawful friends. What do you think of that? Why are you laughing? A serious decision is being made. It amuses us simply because it is not customary and appears foolish in our eyes. I am not suggesting that you practice anything like this, but let us examine the question more closely.

Why is a blessing needed upon a family? It is needed so that this earthly decision may also be bound in Heaven; so that God can lead and direct the union, have the right to intervene and correct those who make mistakes, perform miracles, teach two different people to respect each other's opinion and choice, and do much to make their life happy.

Even unbelievers understand that life is better with God's blessing. At times, they are willing to pay money for someone to pray for them and bless them before God. The Lord respects people's choices and gladly participates in their happiness. Jesus performed His first miracle at a wedding feast, turning

water into a wholesome beverage. The Lord loves to bless those who rightfully ask Him.

How does friendship differ from marriage? It is also a union of two parties, two hearts that have decided to devote their lives to one another, spend time together, solve shared problems, perform different tasks, enjoy meaningful communication, and maintain friendly relationships.

Do these friends know how to be friends? Did anyone teach them this in school? Or were they born with a step-by-step friendship program already in their minds, which they will now put into practice? And where does the carnal nature go when two selfish people decide upon a shared friendship? Perhaps it dies of despair and fear and ceases to have strength and power over their friendly hearts.

I know some lines of verse about friends that say, ‘If a friend suddenly turns out to be neither friend nor foe, but just so-so… do not rebuke him—drive him away…’ The world quickly picks up statements like this and practices them successfully. If you have been rejected once, a second and third rejection will not be long in coming. The heart responds in its own way and closes for a long time or forever. Everyone is occupied with searching for true friends, and if someone does not meet that requirement, that person can be pushed aside while another is sought. Do you know where true friends are made? Share this ‘fishing spot’ with us as well.

The truth is that we do not know how to practice friendship or be friends, but we can learn.

God’s blessing upon any friendship and any relationship will never be unnecessary, and it will never be foolish to ask God to teach me this and bless my decision to be a friend.

But let us go further. The Lord commanded us not only to be friends, but also to love one another. Shall we again imagine a pastor blessing us to love each other? No? We will not?

Should we pray about this love, even if we have decided to love one another? Should I ask my friend whether he loves me? Or should I merely guess, or regard it as self-evident?

A prayer for God's blessing upon my love for a friend and upon our mutual love will never be unnecessary. Love for one another is a lifelong union of two people that continues into Eternity. I bind myself with bonds of love forever so that I may learn it here and then practice it throughout all the unending ages. I am very interested in comprehending this science, and it is new to me. I was not born with such knowledge. I need the One Who knows how to love and can teach me.

I ask for God's blessing upon my love and friendship. The Lord hears this prayer and answers it. It is based upon His Word, in which He commanded us to love in this way. Without Him, all my attempts to love will end in failure. With Him, I will have a blessing within agape. If my friend asks for the same thing, our shared undertaking, bound by us on Earth, will also be bound in Heaven. We will receive an answer from the Heavenly Father. If we are gathered in love in the name of Jesus, He will be in the midst of us. I, my friend, and Jesus—we love one another and form a strong triangle of love, becoming a firm structure for the sound construction of God's designs.

By inviting Jesus into our love, I protect this union from various false accusations and attempts to destroy it. The Lord knows how to guard us and holds us firmly in His hand so that no one can snatch us away.

We pray to God and begin learning about one another, rejoicing that the Lord is with us. Can we be friends and love without praying about it? Yes, but I do not know for how long. The Eternal God must be present within Eternal relationships. He Himself taught that without Him we can do nothing. John 15:5. And without Him, it is not interesting either.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Revelation 3:20; Amos 3:3; Matthew 18:18–20; John 13:34–35; 15:4–5; 17:3, 26; Luke 11:9–10; 1 Thessalonians 5:16–23;

Jeremiah 29:11–13; Ephesians 3:16–21; Numbers 6:22–27; 1 Peter 1:22.

## Dangerous ‘Well-Wishers’

As I gain friends, I try to be sincere and genuine. Not everyone understands or perceives me in the same way, and not every friend is quick to open up to me and draw close. I respect my friends’ freedom of choice and do not impose myself upon anyone. At the same time, I periodically remind them of my presence and participate in the needs of others when I see that I can help.

Some people come to know me more closely, while others keep their distance. But whoever my friend may be, within my heart I choose love and friendship toward that person and remain committed to this choice.

Every interaction I have with a friend also brings trials into our fellowship. I do not know what surprises the enemy of the soul is preparing for us, but I know for certain that he will try to destroy what the Lord is building. God permits our love to be tested and invites us to enter this fire.

Knowing that some misunderstanding for which we are unprepared may arise in our friendship, I invite my friend to be honest and sincere in everything and immediately share anything that may enter our relationship and harm it. These may be very pleasant experiences or bitter disappointments.

I know the story of a friendship that was tested by fire. Adam and his wife enjoyed friendly fellowship with their Creator, Who personally came to them in the cool of the day and had a beautiful relationship with them. Day by day, they came to know one another better and better and lived in constant joy because of this fellowship. They could ask God any question and immediately receive the wisest and most correct answer. The Creator sought to give His children everything they needed and explain everything that interested them. Their friendship grew and became stronger every day. Each new day brought discoveries and blessings that greatly gladdened the heart. Everything around them had been made with love and for love. The first human beings lived in the atmosphere of Heaven, and

nothing clouded their happiness. They knew God personally, face to face. They knew His voice and discovered the beauty of His character through personal fellowship.

But someone came who decided to share his opinion about God. This unfamiliar ‘well-wisher’ appeared very attractive, and his words were quite persuasive. At first, he spoke through an animal called a serpent, thereby attracting the attention of Adam’s wife. A talking serpent was something unusual even to people accustomed to seeing miracles. And the words he shared made her think. Before the woman stood someone who knew the Creator very well and had decided to initiate this curious woman into secrets of God’s soul about which she had never even suspected. What the serpent said was new and attractive. Adam’s wife learned from her new conversational partner that their Heavenly Friend was concealing very important things and did not desire to initiate humanity into the mysteries of good and evil, forbidding them to do what would open their eyes and give them knowledge.

Eve could have gone and consulted her husband and then asked the Lord Himself about what she had learned, hearing firsthand an explanation of what interested her so greatly. But for some reason, she decided to believe the serpent and ate the forbidden fruit. The enemy of the soul gained power over the will of the woman who had sinned and, through her lips, began addressing Adam, telling him what God was really like and how many interesting things He concealed under the guise of prohibitions. Adam could have called upon God’s name, consulted his Heavenly Father, and heard God’s opinion about the questions that had arisen. He knew his Creator personally and had a close friendship with Him. I believe the Lord would not have left Adam ignorant concerning Himself if Adam had desired to learn the truth from the Original Source. But the man preferred to trust the enemy of the soul and violated God’s prohibition by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The very name of the tree indicates that sin contains something good that may appear quite proper and right. But the presence of evil within this good makes such fruit unfit to eat, because it brings death.

A similar story is repeated very often in our time. If I have decided to be someone's friend and desired to love and be a friend, there may be people who want to save my friend and me from our friendship. Such 'well-wishers' may be complete strangers, or they may turn out to be our closest friends.

I remember an occasion when I decided to become the friend of someone whose joyful spirit interested me. First, I made this decision within my heart and asked for God's blessing upon it. Then I told the person, who was still a stranger, that I had decided to become his friend. This greatly surprised him and turned his whole life upside down. Immediately, information began coming to me from every direction about what this person was really like, how many problems he caused, and how dangerous he was. I became uneasy. But my decision to be his friend remained in force, and I desired to investigate everything personally. I chose to love the person I had selected and to form my own opinion of someone who had so many enemies. The Lord revealed and showed me many things within this relationship. I personally became convinced that my friend had imperfections of character, but they did not prevent our friendship. I accept him as he is without agreeing with what I see differently. This person understands perfectly well that I know everything about him, yet with this knowledge I remain a friend who loves at all times. I do not share with anyone what I know about my friend. I can discuss certain details of my knowledge only with Jesus. This attitude preserved our friendship, and I am clean before my friend because I am not rescuing all his other friends and acquaintances from him.

In communicating with my friends, I make an agreement with them that we will share with one another everything that may bring misunderstanding into our relationship. Together, we resolve many questions.

To my surprise, 'well-wishers' appear who decide to save my friends from friendship with me. I do not try to learn their names, because they prefer to perform their 'good deed' anonymously. In response to such actions, however, I can present only myself, tell the whole truth firsthand, and explain

what motives and feelings I have in one matter or another. If my friend decides to clarify things and hear my opinion about myself, I gladly share it. I think only the Lord knows me better than I know myself, so I always have something to tell.

I communicate with my close friends more than with the ‘well-wishers.’ Yet for some reason, a minimum amount of information about me—information that is not always current—can sound more convincing in the ears of a friend who knows me better than anyone else.

The Bible warns us that gossipers and those who carry the secrets of others can become dangerous ‘well-wishers’ with whom it is better not to associate. I try to follow this rule, but I cannot shield my friends from such a spirit. Therefore, I enter this trial of friendship with pain in my heart, understanding that such conversations with outsiders may separate us forever without cause. Unfortunately, some believe rumors, and I become someone I am not, bringing our friendship to an end. But fortunately, there are people who decide to hear my opinion about myself as well, and every doubt is dispelled. We continue loving one another and are very happy.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Genesis 3:1–13; Amos 3:3; Ecclesiastes 4:9–12; Leviticus 19:16; Proverbs 11:13; 16:28; 18:8; 20:19; 26:20–26; Psalm 15:1–3; 101:5–7; Luke 3:14; 5:29–39; Mark 2:15–28; John 21:20–22; Revelation 12:10; Romans 1:28–32.

## A Gift in an Unusual Package

Do you like receiving gifts—especially when they are valuable and useful to you? I remember a time when, as a teenager, I dreamed of having a new pair of jeans like all my peers wore. I went from store to store looking at different styles and dreaming that someday I would own a pair. But jeans like those were very expensive, and I understood that I would never be able to buy a pair for myself.

While spending my school vacation with my grandmother in the countryside, I received a package from my mother. It seemed strange to me that Mom had decided to remember us in this way. The package contained various foods and a bag with a new pair of jeans. I could not believe my eyes. As if spellbound, I opened the bag and tried on what was inside. They had been made in my size. For a while, joy left me speechless. Then my cousin and I began jumping around the house and shouting, 'What a delicious package! What a wonderful package!' Grandma sat quietly nearby, rejoicing in our happiness.

I put on my new pants and did not want to take them off. Whenever I left the house wearing them, it seemed to me that the whole world was looking at my new clothes, but no one was happier about them than I was.

Time passed, and I do not know where those jeans are now. The pairs I owned later never brought my heart the same joy.

When I receive something very valuable and necessary as a gift, my heart rejoices in the realization that I now possess something that will bring me great joy.

Jesus knows the desire of my heart and has prepared a gift for me in an unusual package. Everything we acquire provides us with temporary comforts, but material things cannot satisfy a heart that longs for love and for relationships of love and friendship. Knowing this, Jesus gave us Heaven's most beautiful gift in the form of a new commandment to love one another. He gave this command three times, and each time He presented it in new packaging, making it clear that God's special blessings

come wrapped in trials and that whoever receives them will have God's highest approval.

When Jesus commanded us to love one another, He looked forward to the joy that our love would bring within these relationships. By faith, He was delighted by the genuine joy His disciples would experience when they received one another as gifts.

I did not understand the joy found in loving a friend until the Lord gave me that friend and gave me to him. When I realized what this gift was, how wonderful it was, and how my friend could rejoice in me and bring joy to my heart at all times, I was filled with extraordinary delight. The joy that comes from such an understanding is so great and so intangible that you do not know how, or even where to begin, to thank God for such a miracle. Then another friend appeared, and another, and still another—and all of this brings incredible joy to the heart.

A friend after my own heart is a gift from the Lord. In this world, it is difficult to find people who suit you in this way. But the School of Agape Love can nurture gifts like these and then bring joy to your heart through them.

It is natural to desire to tell everyone about the beauty of God's commandment, its importance, and how wonderful it is to love a friend who loves you.

When I receive something like this from Jesus, my heart begins to explore the essence of the gift. How delightful it is! How capable it is of bringing joy to my heart at all times! How it makes me want to thank God continually for such miracles!

I do not understand why God's children look elsewhere for all kinds of problems while deliberately avoiding what lies plainly before them and brings happiness.

The message to Laodicea also includes the acquisition of love, and it explains to me in greater detail how important it is to possess gold tried in the fire. In the last days, love for one another will become one of the criteria by which the Lord places His seal.

God’s seal is the settling of the mind in the truth. If love for one another is absent from that mind, then what is the Lord supposed to seal—my lawlessness?

Choosing a friend for a relationship of love is very simple. We begin talking about this subject and come to a mutual agreement to love one another. Then we begin developing our relationship.

If no one has taught me what love is or how it works, I may invent various things that reveal certain facets of love to me. But when I have been taught by God and understand how agape works, all my relationships develop more successfully.

The unusual packaging around the gift of love consists of all kinds of trials that gradually reveal to us, step by step, all the beauty and power of Heaven’s agape.

Set out on this path, and you will see for yourself that receiving a friend for all Eternity as a gift is truly royal generosity. Nothing and no one will bring such joy to the heart as a friend from the Lord.

Earthly possessions can very quickly turn into a pile of trash, disappointing us with their short life. Everything in this world is perishable. But a friend and that friend’s love will always remain valuable.

It should be noted, however, that only mutual love brings special joy. If my friend loves me and I do not respond in the same way, it will be difficult for us to bring joy to each other’s hearts. And if I love my friend while he remains indifferent, my love will be one-sided and incomplete, even though my own heart will still rejoice.

Friends, I ask you to fill your pockets with God’s gifts. Sow love everywhere you can. Taste, and you will see that the Lord is good.

When I prepare something desirable and useful as a gift for a friend, I rejoice even before the moment when the gift is presented. I may even tell my friend in advance what I am

going to give so that he can rejoice. But I cannot force him to love my valuable gifts. My friend must decide that for himself.

The commandment to love one another is very important in God’s eyes, and He is waiting for those who will keep it so that He may give His true assessment.

A living friend is a source of many of God’s blessings. That friend is alive in every respect. Friendship with the world and love for the things in the world are not part of God’s plan. But God’s children have a special status and unlimited potential to bring joy through their very presence to those with whom they have decided to love one another.

To love one another is an unending celebration. It is the abundance of God’s continual blessings for all of life and for all Eternity. It is the Spirit of Christ in my heart. It is constant gratitude to God for such a beautiful gift.

But you must taste it for yourself and, from within your own heart, evaluate it through your own discoveries.

The packaging of blessings may hide my true motives from the eyes of others, yet at the same time reveal the value of my friend’s soul—a value that unfolds as I explore it step by step and brings me joy at all times.

Bible Verses for Reflection

John 13:34–35; 15:12–13, 17–19; Isaiah 53:11; Proverbs 17:8, 17; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 4:7–13; Romans 12:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; Jeremiah 29:11; 1 Corinthians 13:1–3.

## The Biochemistry of Friendship

When the Lord created human beings, every detail of our design was carefully thought out, beginning with the smallest quarks and atoms that make up all the molecules and cells of the body. Every millimeter of the human body fits harmoniously into the overall design and communicates very successfully with all the other organs, together composing and representing one person. Amid all this diversity and the astonishing complexity of countless internal processes, we can see the harmonious combination and interaction of spirit, soul, and body.

Breathing keeps us alive, and food from outside nourishes our bodies. Our thoughts and feelings help us choose our path in life, while the body adapts to our choice and develops within the boundaries established either by us or by our circumstances.

Within me are certain companions called hormones. They respond very quickly to what is happening around me. In some amazing way, they are closely connected with all my senses, and they also monitor my every thought so that they can respond promptly and appropriately to what is taking place in my mind.

If I see a lion approaching me who considers himself a ‘tourist’ and sees me as ‘the tourist’s breakfast,’ my adrenal glands begin producing so much adrenaline that I can climb a tall tree very quickly and skillfully and remain there until the lion grows tired of waiting for me below.

Every kind of hormone is given to us for a particular purpose. Dopamine stimulates the brain’s pleasure center. Endorphins gladden the heart and lessen pain. Insulin regulates carbohydrate metabolism and helps the body use excess glucose. Serotonin gives me a good mood and brings happiness. Melatonin regulates the body’s circadian rhythms and is a powerful antioxidant that restores bodily functions during sleep. Testosterone is responsible for sexual desire and promotes the development of bone and muscle tissue. Cortisol

protects the body from the destructive effects of stress and regulates blood pressure.

All this and much more exists within me under the collective name ‘human being.’

The influence of my internal processes upon my mind and mood, and the influence of my mind upon my inner world, are mutual—like a two-way road with its own rules and laws.

When I choose happiness, the workings of my hormones may make me feel very bad. But when I declare the direction I have chosen for my life on a new day, I begin to experience amazing processes as happiness responds to what is happening around me.

When I choose love, I may be indignant at injustice and hate the person who hurt me. But this path opens the door to God’s Spirit, my feelings realign themselves with the direction I have chosen, and I love from a pure heart, rejoicing in the victory I have gained.

When I choose love for one another, I may be riding a wave of dopamine today, but a couple of days later that surge may subside, and my flesh may tell me that I overdid it with such a decision and acted too hastily. But I choose to love my friend and confidently continue in that direction, calling upon power from Above—and it comes. And I love my friend at all times.

As I interact with a friend, I experience various hormonal processes within myself that may surge unexpectedly or decline. My friend experiences something similar, but in his or her own way. And if my friend is a woman, it should be taken into account that once a month she goes through a menstrual cycle, which can affect her behavior very strongly and unpredictably and may come as a surprise.

It should also be taken into account that sexual attraction may arise in a friendship with someone of the opposite sex. Under the influence of the corresponding hormones, it can take control of a person’s will and cause a great deal of harm.

The apostle Paul saw laws like these at work within himself and exclaimed, ‘O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?’ Romans 7:24.

My principles of life, which are based on God’s Word, help me understand what is happening between us and within us and make the right decisions when something goes wrong in the relationship. Love helps correct hormonal imbalances. Hormones obey our Savior, and He knows how to restrain or release them. When we invite Jesus into our love for one another and ask Him to bless this friendship, we should believe that He accomplishes everything.

We may pass through the fire of hormonal hurricanes that will bring our carnal nature back to life, but love will not allow these storms to intensify.

Simple, honest, sincere communication about our inner experiences will resolve a great many misunderstandings.

I do not know what is happening in another person’s life while that person remains silent. When I was seventeen and attending a vocational school, I had to miss an entire day without explaining my absence. A close friend of mine had been stabbed to death in a fight, and I spent the whole day at his funeral. The next day, my teacher scolded me and threatened to expel me for skipping school. I did not want to defend myself because I was grieving the loss so deeply that I did not care what happened next. All I wanted to do was cry, but I silently listened to our homeroom teacher and said nothing. When the teacher contacted my mother and she told him everything, he sincerely apologized to me and, for the rest of my time at the school, never again subjected me to his threats.

Not every friend will share his sorrow with me, because he may wish to spare me and protect me from the additional burden of his problems. But such problems affect the biochemistry of a relationship, and we should not be afraid of this. The prayer of faith can resolve and settle a great deal that we do not understand. A relationship of trust helps us bear one another’s

burdens and address many issues cheerfully and with simplicity of heart.

If I become an intrusive friend, even with good intentions, I should expect conflict. Although no one can have too much love and friendship, if I disregard my friend's freedom and fill all of his personal space with myself, he will certainly dislike it and will eventually want a break from me. Therefore, I should always ask permission before entering closely into the life of someone dear to me, even if that person invites me to remain nearby at all times. 'Withdraw thy foot from thy neighbour's house; lest he be weary of thee, and so hate thee.' Proverbs 25:17.

Even in Eternity, each of us will have our own eternal personal dwelling—a home in which I myself will be the master and no one will prevent me from being alone for solitude, reflection, and prayer.

At times, while talking with a friend, I hear or speak words of love and friendship, and something interesting happens within me as those words are spoken. My happiness hormones go through the roof, and I feel like jumping. Yet the very same words, when spoken to or by another person, are received calmly. Why does this happen? I do not want to be a hypocrite, but my biochemistry decides to respond in this way.

Sometimes I shake someone's hand in greeting and forget about it, but after shaking the hand of a dear friend, I do not even want to wash my hand because I want to preserve the joy I felt during our meeting.

But regardless of how I may feel under the influence of my companions, everything must remain under the control of my mind, and my mind must remain under the control of Jesus.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Romans 7:14–25; 2 Samuel 13:1–17; Proverbs 17:22; Psalm 42:4–6; 92:6; 139:13–18, 23–24; Genesis 1:27; Matthew 12:15; 24:12; Revelation 3:21.

## A Friend's Kind Hands

My friend and I share mutual love. The knowledge that I am a friend gives me confidence that the person whose friend I am loves me from a pure heart and does so with his whole soul. By His example, Jesus teaches us to relate to one another in this way and gives me faith that He also loves us. In earthly friendship, however, we can visibly demonstrate how such love can exist in this world.

At the very beginning of our mutual relationship, all my hormones come alive within me and bring me so much joy and inspiration because of the newness of what is happening that my entire life becomes one continual celebration. It seems that I have entered Heaven and will never leave it. The love between my friend and me is so unusual and beautiful that I never want to leave this happiness. Amid all of this, a continual prayer of gratitude rises for all of God's blessings contained in obedience to the commandment to love one another.

My pleasure center has received what it desired, and my soul has experienced complete satisfaction from friendship's gentle touch upon my heart.

The days pass, and our love for one another grows stronger, while my inner experiences enter a stage of steady functioning. The newness of the relationship fades, making way for everyday constancy. The celebration is no longer there, but in its place is a firm stability that rests not upon fleeting feelings and emotions, but upon a solid principle originating in God's Word. I understand that the love between us is eternal and that the friendship which once began has a very deep foundation and rests in God's hand. It is precisely this calm assurance that begins forming the strongest bonds between us—bonds that grow stronger day by day and will never break.

At times, another hormonal surge flashes through our heartfelt fellowship, adding beauty to the relationship through its influence and bringing some emotional color to our friendship. Yet the mind has already advanced far enough and established

my will so firmly upon heavenly principles that neither hormonal changes nor their absence can shake us or destroy anything between us.

My friend is not always physically near me, where I can touch or embrace him. If I looked only for friends whom I could meet in person, I might have to search for a very long time. But modern means of communication and online communities allow me to find very quickly those who are close to me in spirit and have a close relationship with Jesus. This is one of the distinctive features of our time that should be taken into account and used for the good of the soul.

Not every friend may have ideal family circumstances in which I can be warmly welcomed into his home. Yet modern communication allows me to enter my friend's heart very quickly, crossing great distances, obstacles, and borders, and to become established in that heart forever.

A recent gathering of friends from our School demonstrated how simple and joyful it is to see and welcome people with whom you have already become united and spiritually close, even though you have never interacted with them in person.

A friend's hands can embrace you across vast distances and bring the same comfort and healing as if that friend were beside you.

Consider where Jesus is physically located at this moment. He is very far away, in a place no human being can reach by his own power. Yet through the Holy Spirit, the Lord is near everyone who calls upon Him and desires a very close relationship with Him. We accept this reality by faith and receive real answers to all our needs and expectations.

But when the conversation turns to earthly relationships, many people limit themselves to in-person relationships and categorically refuse to have anything virtual. As a result, they lose many advantages without ever receiving what they desire. Yet the heart needs a friend who can touch the strings of your soul and play a quiet melody of love that both of you understand.

Love cannot be touched with the hands, and not every person may be touched physically. A friend's kind hands can cross any distance to touch my soul at the very moment when it greatly needs this and is open to such a relationship. The Lord knows my friends' needs and very often prompts me to do something for them for no particular reason—spontaneously, yet with all my heart. And it works.

How pleasant it is to carry out a work while knowing that there are people waiting for what your hands will produce, so that they may receive it immediately and share with you the joy of such a blessing.

Take these lessons, for example. They are released in real time on particular days. Someone awaits them like fresh, hot pies, eager to share with me the joy of tasting new revelations and to thank God for them. I greatly appreciate Christ's words regarding this undertaking. We read in Matthew 24:45–46: 'Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing.' Our shared joy in a common spiritual meal draws our hearts closer, while the message of love and friendship that we have been studying for so many years unites us into one large and close-knit family.

In all my experience of gaining online friends with whom I have entered into close relationships, I have never yet had anyone become disappointed in our friendship when we met in person.

A friend's kind hands are always open to support you in a difficult moment through prayers, kind words, and heartfelt joy. A friend senses what is in your heart and is always ready to participate in all your plans whenever an urgent need arises.

At times, I do not need my friend's help as much as I need the knowledge that someone needs me and that I bring someone benefit and joy. And if I know that someone loves me from a pure heart, this gives me such powerful support in many matters that I do not even need any words from that friend. The mere knowledge that I am loved gives me wings, and I can

accomplish many things for which I otherwise would have neither the desire nor the strength.

And what do my kind hands do for my friends? I have abundant experience of how many blessings enter the lives of people with whom I wholeheartedly share what I receive from God. It always brings me such joy to take love from Heaven, pass it through my heart, and pour streams of God's blessings into a friend's life, adding to them my own human qualities of soul and material blessings. It is so pleasant to watch this happen.

How difficult it can sometimes be to convey to my friends the simple truth of how much I love them. To some, these are merely words without meaning, but I do not casually toss around statements like these. If I have said something of this kind, I am fully conscious and accountable for the fact that I have this love in my heart.

I greatly enjoy being a channel of God's love. I receive it from Above in order to pass it on, and I watch those who receive it. They think it belongs to me and wonder where I have obtained so much. I modestly point to the True Source, but for some reason my friends decide that I am the one responsible and that I possess this abundance myself. In the end, we agree that all of it belongs to God and that without Him we can do nothing. And God greatly enjoys using our hands to embrace all of us at all times.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Proverbs 17:17; 27:9; John 13:34–35; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 4:16; Jeremiah 31:3; Colossians 1:16–23; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; Ephesians 4:11–16; Philippians 2:5; Romans 12:9–10; 13:10.

## Losing Friends

Friendship with people includes some painful experiences that cause a great deal of hurt and cannot be avoided or ignored. They are called the loss of friends.

One day, a rich young man who possessed a great estate approached Christ. Jesus loved this young man and invited him to become His disciple. But first, the young man needed to part with certain things. Not many people were granted such a privilege. Yet for some reason, this young businessman went away sorrowful and disappeared forever. We do not even know his name. Jesus watched sadly as the man walked away—a man who could have become His friend and entered history as one of Christ's followers, leaving everything for His sake and receiving far more even in this life.

If we consider Judas Iscariot, the loss of this friend was extremely painful for all the disciples and for Jesus Himself. The one whom God Himself had chosen to remain near the Savior somehow failed to honor this sacred trust.

Whether I want to or not, I must experience the loss of people who did not even have time to become my friends.

My love for people and my desire to befriend them give me the courage to offer myself and make important decisions about gaining new friends. I step over my fears and doubts and offer a person something that sometimes does not fit within his worldview and conflicts with all his plans. Some initially respond to my 'attack' and even allow me into their personal space, trying to understand what kind of wonder has suddenly entered their life.

But I do not come alone. When I offer myself, I bring behind me an entire freight train of my knowledge, blessings, revelations, and character traits. At the head of it all, I present Jesus, Who directs all these new processes within the relationship. All this comes naturally as part of my offer to become a friend. This does not mean that I immediately pour all these blessings onto the new friend's head. But I let him understand who I am and

that all the good qualities of my soul are now at his disposal, to enjoy as he wishes. Most importantly, my Jesus can now reveal through me all His tenderness and the love I have been taught and am ready to give at all times.

What would you do with a new friend like this if I approached you in such a way? My new acquaintances are not blind, and believers have discernment and can understand very quickly who is standing before them and what he wants. The newness of a relationship always attracts thirsty souls, and people decide to draw closer to unfamiliar fellow believers at their own risk or out of love for them.

New relationships bring new discoveries into life and call me to make new decisions. When I welcome one more friend into my life, I open my heart to that person. I do not know where our friendship will lead me, but it certainly will not lead back to the peace and quiet I had before this event.

Whatever my new acquaintance—a candidate for lifelong friendship—may be like, he remains free in his choice and has the right to decide for himself how to build a relationship with me or whether to build one at all. I respect this choice, but I do not know what it will be. Therefore, for my part, I plan for success and move in that direction without giving any reason for the relationship to be broken. I am not going to hide Jesus, and I gladly share Him with my new friend. I understand that if Christ is absent from our friendship, it will not become the friendship it ought to be in Him. I also greatly desire to share all my spiritual knowledge and discoveries with my friend, because this is my life. I do not immediately pour all of this into the life of my new gift from the Lord, but it is difficult to hide a burning candle inside one’s clothing or pretend it is not there.

I will say honestly that, as a channel of God’s love who shares this knowledge with you, I find it impossible to hold it back when communicating with new people whom I desire to gain as friends. Although at times I need to observe a person more closely and give him an opportunity to enter calmly into a relationship with me, light is difficult to contain within, and it

will certainly illuminate the life of my new acquaintance. And what can love offer?

Different encounters and different people teach me to offer myself and a relationship with me with special tenderness and care. Many people have broken hearts and empty pockets, and it is worth noticing this first and participating in a person’s life without asking anything in return. You do not want to give yourself to everyone forever without first understanding whom you are dealing with. Nor is everyone ready to receive me as a gift for eternal use. But eventually, points of connection are found, and the next step remains: declaring your serious lifelong intentions and announcing that you are a friend. This is where the most interesting part begins. Your acquaintance understands what you are offering, but he also sees the freight train firmly coupled to you—a train from which you have no intention of separating, but with which you will certainly enrich your new friend’s life. You yourself are an unexplored planet that he will now spend an endlessly long time discovering, while he will also need to open himself. This means that one of the best parts of your life will now be shared with a new person who, through his friendliness and presence, will bring joy to your heart throughout this earthly life. Then, throughout all Eternity, he will lay claim to your eternal time and reserve an incredibly large number of hours for himself every week. All this and much more rushes very quickly through the mind. And when you also consider that a new friendship will pour new light into your life, forcing you to reconsider many habits and priorities, it becomes too much.

And you simply look at your new friend and wait for his decision. Some dare to go farther, some remain silent and think, and some make it clear that I have come to the wrong person. I do not need many explanations. I am ready for any decision, but a refusal to become friends always brings pain. It does not destroy your life, but it shows that this person will never become someone close to you and that you will now have to live your entire life without him.

Yet the optimism of a loving heart does not allow these thoughts to develop. You set new goals and mark out new heights that are still worth conquering.

Sometimes existing friends decide to end the relationship and stop communicating without explaining why. They have the right to do this, and because you understand your own imperfection, you cannot prevent them. Yet losses like these bring unusual experiences into life. Jesus can comfort us better than anyone and explain the true reason for such separations. It is worth reconsidering your own behavior and continuing to love those who have left you.

Although the Lord experienced the pain of loss as He watched His departing friends turn their backs on Him—especially after solemn truths were spoken in Galilee—He never asked anyone to reconsider and return. Moreover, He asked even His closest disciples whether they also wished to leave Him. Sometimes He asks me this question as well. ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.’ From now on, I will go only with You.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Proverbs 18:24; John 6:64–71; 13:21; Luke 18:18–30; Matthew 10:32–33; 19:16–30; 26:23–25; Psalm 27:9–10; Isaiah 1:3–4; Jeremiah 2:13; 2 Timothy 1:15; 2:11–13; 4:16.

## God’s Song

When I attended camp meetings, I noticed an interesting practice that greatly enhanced our gathering and lent special solemnity to our praise of God through song. When everyone present began praising the Lord in song, one of the chosen singers would take a microphone and begin singing with everyone else, using his voice to set the key and tempo for the other voices. If you did not see this taking place and simply sang with everyone, you might not even notice that someone was guiding the rhythm and giving a special sound to the combined voices. As a result, the song sounded very solemn and vibrant. Your voice joined the other voices in unison, creating the impression that a heavenly choir of angels had joined us in praising God. In fact, this is exactly what happens. God’s angels take part in all our gatherings and add a special quality to everything we do for God’s glory. When we rise to sing a song of praise together, their voices are skillfully woven into our singing, bringing us joy and driving away the evil spirits that seek to destroy everything.

I believe that the Lord Himself sings these solemn hymns with us, blessing everyone present as He does so.

God’s voice is entirely unique and can be heard everywhere. It may be heard in the sounds of nature, in the gentle whisper of the wind, in the joyful thoughts of children, in a friend’s words, in inspired letters, and in the speech of someone who speaks words of inspiration and instruction. The Lord has chosen human beings to save human beings, and He carries out His plan for the salvation of the world through His friends who agree to be His mouthpiece.

We read in 1 Corinthians 1:26–29: ‘For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are

not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in His presence.’

We who are called by God to be His witnesses become channels of God’s grace when we enter into covenant with Him and dedicate ourselves to His service.

I often observe the following. As I communicate with my friends, I share with them the blessings and thoughts that fill my heart. It seems that I am saying nothing unusual, and even when I do, I feel nothing miraculous; and if I do feel something, I attach no special significance to it. Yet those close to me begin telling me how good and joyful they feel and how God, through me, answered the questions that troubled them and brought them comfort. Very often, after conversations with friends, I hear words of gratitude to God. I also hear the Lord’s voice in the words of many of God’s children with whom I fellowship or who share their revelations with me. At times, this voice sounds so clearly and powerfully that I understand how deeply the Lord desires to convey something very important and useful to me. A man of God is a very significant instrument in God’s hands for communicating His will. Yet every interaction of this kind has a distinctive feature: the Lord uses one human being to speak through him to another. At that point, the mechanism of free will comes into operation, and everyone can freely choose what to do with what he has heard and how to respond to the light sent through someone like himself. At times, I may excuse my ignorance in refusing to accept God’s will by saying that the speaker merely shared his own worldview with me, while I have my own views regarding the matter under discussion. The Lord respects my choice and sends the necessary light from another source. Eventually, as I hear the same instruction from every direction, I begin to wonder whether perhaps God desires to tell me something.

The Lord uses every person who is open to God’s influence to speak through that individual to the listener’s heart. Conviction of the truth is found not in the speaker’s eloquence, but in the invisible, convincing power of the Holy Spirit, Who reveals the

meaning of what has been said and brings revelations from Above into the mind.

God loves His children and, with special tenderness and care, educates each one of us while taking into account the individual characteristics of the way our minds work.

By calling us to love one another and placing this command within the framework of God's commandments, the Lord longs for our obedience in this matter and waits for those who will hear this new commandment. God is love, and through our love for one another He desires to reveal Himself to us in all the beauty of His character, using one person to love another person. God could tell each of us directly how much He loves us and that He expects the same response from us. But in such a dialogue, we would most likely be governed by fear and awe before the supernatural. We would have no way to withdraw from such an encounter and would assure the Lord that we loved Him too, without understanding what we were talking about.

But in fellowship with a friend, I am free. Even if the Lord Himself is speaking through my friend's lips, I am free to hear what I want to hear and then make my choice and act as I think best. My friend likewise has the right to make his own decisions regarding me, and I cannot force him to love me, even if I see a special blessing in it for both of us.

The Lord waits for the moment when my friend and I, through our mutual decision to love one another, invite Him into our relationship and allow the Holy Spirit to teach us this love so that we may receive from it the greatest possible joy, blessing, and delight.

God's song begins to sound within loving hearts in harmony with our words. A simple phrase spoken to a friend with love contains a piece of Heaven. After passing through my heart, it can touch my friend's soul and bring him special joy through the touch of God's invisible hand concealed within simple words of love.

The Lord weaves Himself so skillfully into our spirit of love for one another that it may seem to us that we ourselves love this way. Our bodies come into harmony with the words of love and gladden us by releasing hormones into our emotional experience. The mind concludes that it has reached the summit of knowledge in this science and can now develop freely in this love and make new discoveries. But the Lord makes it clear that without Him we can do nothing and that only because of His protection are we able to love one another safely and become calmly established in this choice.

God’s commandment concerning our love for one another is unique because the love between us must be the same as Jesus’ love for us. Without Him, we will never learn how to love one another properly. We simply do not know how, and we will not love one another as the Lord loves us.

Jesus desires us to bear much fruit while remaining connected to Him. He is our Teacher of love, and I am His student.

Let us allow God to sing His song of love in harmony with our decision to love one another! He will not silently watch our attempts to obey His commandment. Instead, He will adorn our relationship with special sounds of heavenly origin that will gladden our hearts and make it seem that we ourselves have been able to understand and attain this. In this journey into one another’s hearts, amazing adventures and discoveries of God’s grace await us.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Hebrews 1:1–2; 1 Corinthians 1:25–31; Psalm 9:1; 30:12; 109:30; 150:1–2; 2 Samuel 22:50; 1 Kings 19:11–12; Exodus 4:10–16; John 13:34–35; 15:1–10; 1 John 3:11, 23–24; 4:7–8; 2 Thessalonians 1:12; 1 Peter 4:14.

## The Fruit of the Spirit in Friendship

We read in Ephesians 5:8–9: ‘For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light: (For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth;)’

We read further in Galatians 5:22–23: ‘But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.’

As I read and reread these verses, I noticed that the word ‘fruit’ is singular, and I could not imagine what it was supposed to look like. Perhaps it is something like an orange, with many sections in one fruit, each section being a distinct substance. I always wanted to be a fruitful Christian. In my interactions with people, I tried to produce this fruit, but I did not understand how it was done. Then I abandoned these efforts and simply began to live. An orange tree does not need to make an effort to prove something to someone. It simply produces oranges because it is an orange tree. The distinctive feature of the fruit of the Spirit is that it ripens upon a tree bearing the common name ‘Love.’ This is one of God’s names, and without Him we can do nothing.

One winter, my wife asked me to bring her some branches from a certain tree. I did not understand what she intended to do with them. She placed the branches in water, and after a while fresh green leaves appeared upon them, followed by blossoms. It was such a joy to experience the mood of spring in winter. But later, the branches withered even though we changed their water frequently. I had so hoped that the flowers would mature and begin turning into fruit. After that, I cut branches that already had small fruit beginning to form and watched to see whether they could bear fruit in a vase. But it always ended with the branches withering and producing no fruit at all.

I also noticed that the fruit of every plant ripens at an appointed time—neither earlier nor later.

Love for one another is a tree in God’s garden, grafted into one common Root named Jesus, from Whom the plant draws all its life-giving sap so that it may develop properly. Living in Christ, we simply find one another and decide to give one another love, grafting our relationship into the True Vine. Jesus has an abundance of life-giving sap that nourishes us with its vital power and brings a special flavor and interesting experiences into our mutual love. My friend and I do not plan to produce anything for this world, but time passes and we notice an interesting fruit growing upon our tree of friendship—and then much fruit. It is so fragrant and delicious! We look at it in amazement. It seems that we are not trying to produce anything. We simply love one another from a pure heart and ask the Lord to bless this relationship. Then we rejoice that we have each other and that peace and harmony exist between us. We are in no hurry in our love and friendship. We intend to carry it throughout our entire lives and take it with us into Eternity. Such an extended period requires special longsuffering, and we possess it. We do not even worry about having to remain friends and love one another for a very long time.

Mutual goodness is also present in our relationship. From morning until evening, we think of ways to bring joy to each other in such a manner that everyone will benefit. Doing good to someone you love is not difficult at all; more precisely, it is impossible not to do it.

Mercy has so thoroughly permeated our hearts within our friendship that we are ready to live by it in our love and also to share it with everyone who desires it. How could it be otherwise? How could you fail to show mercy to someone you love? Love covers everything and finds an explanation for anything that may happen.

We believe that Jesus blesses us in our relationship because we have dedicated ourselves to Him, asked Him for this blessing, and see how He answers and nourishes us with His life-giving sap. We believe that the Lord, having begun this good work in us, will perform it until the day of His Coming. Even during the greatest trials and the great tribulation, we will continue loving

one another and developing our relationship, unless circumstances separate us. And in Eternity, no one will prevent us from continuing to build our love and friendship.

Meekness is also present in our friendship. We study one another so tenderly and carefully in our search for the treasures of the soul that we are afraid of touching places damaged in former battles. Meekness in love helps us exercise restraint and sensitivity, avoid entering where we may not go, and refrain from raising subjects in conversation that cause pain and harm. We patiently wait for permission to enter one another's lives, and we sincerely rejoice that we always prove to be needed and desired by each other. Meekness helps us exercise restraint in many matters and show forbearance toward one another's mistakes, covering everything with mutual forgiveness and love.

Our friendship also includes temperance—abstaining from everything that could harm or destroy our relationship, while using in moderation the qualities of soul that we generously share with one another. We respect our friend's freedom of choice and exercise of will, and we do not insist upon doing good to each other against either person's wishes. Respect for one another is always present in our relationship, and we value it greatly.

The righteousness of Jesus covers our relationship and makes it pure and perfect. At first, we were afraid to speak to each other about our love. But then we saw that God does not forbid this, and we began practicing this manner of speech. And you know, it is possible to express love not only through actions and motives, but also through words. All of this brings mutual joy and warms our hearts. The righteousness of Christ makes our relationship holy and right. We continually compare ourselves with Him and ask, 'Lord, is this right? Is this permitted? Is this proper?' God's law defines the boundaries of our happiness, within which we can develop in peace.

When we bear much fruit in love and truth, we are not under the law, but under grace. The Lord keeps us from every evil and

protects our relationship from various temptations and attacks from outside.

The Holy Spirit produces within us those very transformations we need when we decide to love one another, build our future lives upon this foundation, and invite Christ into the relationship. We do not exert effort to bear the fruit of the Spirit; we simply love one another with simplicity of heart and fellowship with one another. Then we look and see such beautiful clusters growing upon the branches of our union. They delight not only us, but all our friends and acquaintances as well. They themselves recognize that we are Jesus' disciples because we have love among ourselves.

Our friendship has a prophetic foundation and originates in God's commandment. Christ then offers it in the message to Laodicea as gold tried in the fire—a means of leaving the lukewarm condition and enriching one's life with new experiences and an abundance of fruit.

We do not know how to love one another or how to practice friendship properly. But once we set out upon this path, we allow the Holy Spirit to teach us this science and to work in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Psalm 1:1–3; Romans 6:22; Philippians 2:13; Matthew 5:3–12; Ephesians 4:23–25; 1 Peter 1:22; Galatians 6:9–10; Proverbs 17:17; 23:23; 25:15; 27:9; John 13:34–35; 15:1–9, 26; 16:13; 1 Timothy 1:5; 2 Timothy 2:22; 1 Thessalonians 4:9.

## The Unknown Science of Love

When a person is born into this world, he is a blank page upon which will be written what he will become, what he will know, and what he will believe. The first convincing information I receive in childhood and throughout my life shapes my opinions, will, and intellect.

Our world is filled with all kinds of sciences and knowledge that shape society's mentality. The film and entertainment industry has made an enormous contribution to the formation of our consciousness, values, and priorities. We call all of this culture.

The modern concept of love has become so distorted in people's understanding that we use this word for feelings, infatuations, passions, nostalgia, appetite, personal interests, and views. When someone speaks about love, we attach no special importance to it and do not even listen carefully to what is being discussed.

School curricula contain no science of love and friendship that is taught to us from childhood. No one instills in us a culture of agape love. Yet we sometimes read books about it, watch movies, and listen to stories. What we have allowed into our minds has become our personal opinion, established upon whatever we were persuaded to believe. Changing an opinion is far more difficult than forming one.

If diesel fuel is poured into a clean barrel and the barrel is then washed thoroughly, it will continue giving off that original smell of diesel fuel for the rest of its existence, and nothing will ever make it suitable for anything useful.

And so, carrying my store of knowledge and life experience, I enter the School of Agape Love to learn what is taught there. Strange things are placed into my ears—things my mind cannot contain and that contradict many of my ideas. My entire understanding of love appears to have been turned upside down, and I begin to grasp the simple truth that I do not possess this agape. This may make me indignant, and I may proudly hold my head high and leave this strange community

with dignity. If I do not understand how eternal love differs from what I already possess and call love, I will not remain within the walls of this School either. And when the revelation finally reaches me that learning the science of love will take my best time—or occupy all my time throughout my entire life—I begin to feel uneasy. Is it worth studying something to which I must devote my whole self?

If Christ had not commanded us to love one another, I would have lost interest in studying love long ago. But the message of the Faithful Witness assures me that love makes me an overcomer. Understanding this, I no longer want to go anywhere, but I need greater revelations. If I am going to learn, then I will truly learn!

As I study the theory of a science that is new to me and allow it to shape my mind, I understand that I am coming into contact with something great and inaccessible that I did not previously know. Through the knowledge of agape love, God gradually reveals His character to me and displays His beauty and purity from many different angles.

At a certain point in my education, I decide to gain practical knowledge of love and begin looking for someone with whom I can enter into mutual love. Naturally, the School of Love contains more potential friends than the world does. Knowing the foundations and principles, I take an important step and offer my love and friendship to my new friend while awaiting his decision. If the person with whom I am speaking understands what I mean and agrees, we plunge into the unexplored worlds within each other and begin comprehending the practical part of the science of love, trying to apply all the knowledge we have received. As a result, I realize that I do not know how to love or be a friend. This is foreign to my human nature. I do not know where to begin or how to continue the relationship, yet I see it taking shape and acquiring particular forms and boundaries. My friend’s free will continually places obstacles before me or opens the endless expanses of his soul, into which I must enter with all my baggage and remain forever. I learn to love while living in the heart of this love.

There is no road back, but I do not know where to go next or what to do with my friend. I ask God to teach me and fill my heart with love, and He answers, though not always in the way I want.

My friend has a character—and quite a character at that. Sometimes he thinks in an entirely different way, and his opinion may completely contradict my worldview. And I am supposed to love this wonder? There is no other way. I step over myself, break something within my heart, and continue forward. Although the love between us is pure and comes from the holy Source of heavenly power, we ourselves are imperfect and weak. Yet Jesus teaches those who open to His knocking and His voice how to love.

At first, all of this interests me; then it becomes fascinating. But when I go very deep, I realize that I do not know where to go next or how to develop what has reached the dead end of my understanding. By the world's standards, I would abandon everything at the first crossroads and run back into the world of my Hollywood illusions. But something great and inaccessible draws me onward. I cry out, and the Lord opens new doors before me so that I may immerse myself in my friend's world, enriching him with my love and being enriched by what my friend gives me.

My friend is not a child prodigy or an extraordinary genius. He is also learning to love me and does not know what to do with me when I share my distinctive traits with him or show him my accomplishments in friendship.

Oh, if only someone had taught us this science in childhood, how easy it would be for us now to enter the depths of the revelations within our hearts! Yet I cannot say that loving a friend is difficult. It is not difficult; it is extremely interesting and enlightening. The challenge in loving one another is that your friend's soul is like an open textbook on quantum physics written in Chinese. You see endless expanses of incomprehensible resources and knowledge being given to you, while understanding that you understand nothing. And your

friend waits for you to decipher the book and tell him about himself.

It becomes very interesting. I do not know myself as well as a friend can come to know me. He studies my character from within me, translates the features of my inner design into understandable language, and then presents this to me as another revelation. My soul is the same kind of mysterious book in an incomprehensible language for my friend, yet it is open for investigation. I am a mysterious world that my friend must decipher, and I see the same thing in him. The more we love and come to know one another in love, the more convinced we become that we do not know how to love or be friends. But this does not trouble us, and we continue mastering this science.

How wonderful it is to love one another! If I could wish the most wonderful thing for you, it would be that you set out upon this path of unending joy and blessings and taste for yourselves that the Lord is good.

Each new friend is no longer frightening to me. I have the experience gained from my previous discoveries, and I joyfully bring it into a new relationship. Although the new friend's heart also opens, the open book of his soul is now a textbook on nuclear physics written in Japanese—a language I must also learn.

The practice and theory of love together accomplish something amazing in our relationships. As we comprehend this science from within ourselves, we begin to love one another. This is so wonderful that words simply cannot describe all the advantages of such study.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Jeremiah 33:3; Ecclesiastes 12:11–14; 1 Peter 1:22; 2:17; 3:8; John 6:45; 13:34–35; 2 Peter 1:5–10; Proverbs 17:17; Romans 12:9–10; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; Hebrews 13:1; Isaiah 43:4; 1 John 1:7; 4:7–8.

## God’s Presence

Everyone who gathers the courage to decide to love those around them and begins comprehending the science of love and friendship will encounter new experiences in life. Although each of us has an individual perception of what is happening, we can confidently say that agape love contains something special and unearthly. It cannot be explained, but it can truly be experienced.

If someone decides that love is not a science, but merely a predictable pattern of certain events or the emotional experiences of people in love, that person will not spend time and life studying the teaching being offered. Why study something that comes and goes? But we understand that love is the science of God. It is an art. It is a subject that cannot be comprehensively understood and mastered in a short time. The theory of love does not remain theoretical; it always has a practical application in the life of each one of us.

When I understand that I am dealing with a science of heavenly origin that will reveal God’s mysteries to me, I approach the study of love and friendship more seriously than before. At some point in my life, I realize that I do not possess love, but that it is near and ready to become mine. Knowing God in the spirit of love gives me a special kind of life—eternal life—and gives this life exceptional quality.

If someone who has come to believe in God decides to wander the world and live on charity, that person will have the experience of a poor Christian. If someone else, while believing in God, desires to start and develop a business and then uses the profits to support fellow believers who lack enough money for basic living expenses, that person will have the experience of a believing business owner, and the quality of his life will differ from the lives of poor people. Yet he too is considered a man of God.

If someone decides to spend his Christian life in complete solitude, desperately struggling against his carnal desires and

discovering biblical truths through this struggle, he will have the experience of a solitary Christian. If someone else decides to establish a Christian family with a consecrated person, carry out all their plans and tasks together, share mutual love, and bring new people into the world, they will have the experience of a Christian family.

If, while believing in Jesus, I choose not to study love or ask God for it, but instead allow it to come and go from my life on its own, I risk missing something extremely important and losing what is eternal. Although my biblical knowledge will improve the quality of my life and obedience to the law will preserve me from many troubles, the flavor and beauty of Eternity will remain unknown to me. But if I decide to possess love, understand its principles and laws, study its power, and learn how it operates within me and how it is revealed in God's character, I will discover a new world of endless revelations and blessings that will truly enrich my life and make it better and more beautiful.

When I invite love into my life, I call upon the name of God. He comes at my request and dwells within me. Loving makes me feel good. It gladdens my heart, fills my life with light, and gives me an awareness of something extremely important.

There was a time when I asked God to reveal Himself to me in some unmistakable way and allow me to experience something supernatural. In essence, however, I wanted an emotionally thrilling experience so that I could later amaze everyone with my 'wow.' In His mercy, the Lord did not answer expectations like these. Instead, in a natural way, He filled my life with Himself through the knowledge of truth that I possessed. The study of love brought me enormous blessings that influenced every area of my life. A beautiful path opened before me—a path about which I had read a great deal, but never imagined that I myself would be able to walk.

I did not understand why I always felt well while other fellow believers suffered and lived in despair. Love brings God's invisible presence into life. Through this gift of Heaven, the Lord touches my heart so tenderly and naturally that I accept

all my discoveries as the normal course of life and the natural condition of the mind. Love cleanses the heart, brings order to my thoughts, reveals the true meaning of spiritual truths, and establishes the priorities in my life. ‘Nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.’ Galatians 2:20.

In our love for one another, I not only have God within me, but also allow Him to enrich me through my friend’s love. It would be untrue to say that God is absent from our mutual love and that it consists merely of human feelings and experiences. It is God Himself Who teaches us to love one another, and it is He Who gives us genuine and unfeigned agape for one another, personally abiding within our relationship. In essence, through our love for one another, we share Jesus, Who lives within us and desires to reveal Himself precisely through a relationship like this.

When we decide to become friends, we bind ourselves through this agreement on Earth, and it is affirmed in Heaven. When we choose to love one another, we invite into our friendship the One Who is Love. God does not keep us waiting, but immediately begins sharing Himself within our relationship.

All the powers of the soul and mind participate in love for one another. With my mind, I understand what is happening; my will controls what is taking place; my feelings gladden my heart; and my body produces what should naturally be present and add beauty to our friendship. This relationship contains God’s plan for the last days: that we love one another.

To love one another is a heavenly science and the art of eternal life. If I understand it differently, I will approach it differently. Life with God is good, but the life of God within me and within my relationship with a friend is beautiful. This is what gives God the right to remain continually present in my life.

During one prayer service, a question was asked about the special experiences of God’s presence I had undergone during the previous year. I found it difficult to remember vivid moments and remarkable miracles. But the Lord drew my attention to the fact that every day spent in His love is the most

fascinating miracle of my life. It has become so familiar that I have even stopped noticing it. Love, joy, peace, goodness, and all the other blessings of Heaven have become such a natural condition of my soul that I do not stop to consider what is actually happening. I simply love, and to me there is nothing unusual about it. How could it be otherwise? Without love, nothing has meaning.

Today, there is much discussion about how a person can hear God's voice. I am very interested in learning about other people's experiences, but I have my own. Love opens my spiritual ears to hear God in a special way. Within love, I learn to hear what the Lord is saying through a friend and what love desires to say through me. The voice of love has become so natural within my consciousness that I sometimes take it to be an expression of my own heart.

God's presence within my love—and within our love for one another—has become so ordinary, and the joy it brings so constant, that I cannot even understand how anyone can live without it. What would life without love be like? It is frightening to imagine.

The Lord does not plan to amaze me continually. Yet He desires that, in my love for a friend, I not forget Him. After all, He too is worthy of my love.

Bible Verses for Reflection

John 14:18; Matthew 28:19–20; Genesis 28:15; 1 Kings 6:13; 1 John 4:7; John 13:34–35; 14:23, 27; 15:7–9; 17:6, 10, 22–26; Psalm 16:8; Galatians 2:20; 5:22–24; 1 Corinthians 13:1–3; Romans 8:9, 14.

## Infatuation and Love

He and she looked at each other and realized that at last they had met the person of whom they had dreamed for so long. They had only recently reached adulthood and felt quite independent. Their believing parents had given them freedom to make their own decisions. This led them to reevaluate their values, and the young people began arranging their own lives and building their personal relationships with God.

Then one beautiful day, he and she noticed each other at a youth convention and realized that this meeting was no accident. The person looking so intently and cheerfully into the other's eyes was the long-awaited answer to a prayer of faith. They were drawn to each other like magnets and understood that love at first sight truly existed and that something extremely important and significant was now taking place.

Relying upon their feelings and intuition, they decided to develop the relationship and asked God together in prayer to bless their friendship. Time ceased to exist for them. They could talk for hours about everything under the sun, believing that this celebration within their souls would never end. And why should it, since they loved each other?

One day, he decided carefully to take her hand in his, and with childlike trust she allowed her beloved to do so. Something resembling an electric current passed through their bodies. This innocent touch made them feel so good that they decided to spend their time together this way from then on. Even during prayer, the young couple did not want to release each other, and the joy of such closeness overflowed their young and pure hearts.

One day, they gathered their courage and entered her church holding hands, thereby attracting the attention of everyone in the congregation, especially her friends. He proved to be an interesting conversationalist and, during the Sabbath School lesson discussion, occasionally released her hand so that he could open the Bible to the appropriate passage.

He and she were so focused upon each other that they built a high fence around their relationship so that no one could interfere with their inner world, sow anything harmful, or express an opinion about their friendship. They were prepared to defend their relationship by any means and did not allow suspicious fellow believers to come near them. Although no one was trying to prevent their friendship, they still noticed people looking at them in different ways. Some looked at them with a smile, some expressed undisguised regret, and some friends asked when the wedding would take place.

They began seriously considering that starting a family would be a wise decision. Married life would allow them lawfully to do what they desired so passionately, yet from which they restrained themselves because they understood that it was wrong to rush ahead.

Then the day came when he decided to take the next step. Embracing his girlfriend, he confidently kissed her on the lips. Both felt slightly dizzy and never wanted to be apart again. As though spellbound, they pressed close to each other, understanding only that this was true love and that they had simply been made for one another. She closed her eyes with pleasure and, with childlike trust, allowed him to continue kissing her, joyfully returning his kisses. She felt his hands caressing her back, but subconsciously made sure they did not move below her waist, gently repositioning them whenever that boundary was crossed.

Their relationship entered a new stage. Holding hands no longer brought their hearts the same joy, and they decided always to walk with their arms around each other to show others how happy they were. From time to time, they exchanged kisses to strengthen their friendship. When spending time this way became normal for them, they decided to demonstrate their love for one another among their friends and later in church as well, tenderly holding each other around the waist. They decided not to kiss in public, although their loving glances made it clear to everyone that a wedding would soon take place.

Someone advised them to undergo premarital counseling. They gave a curt agreement, although they understood that their feelings for each other were so strong and constant, and their attachment so powerful, that additional advice would be unnecessary for them.

Then they came to meet with the pastor, who began asking serious questions that bewildered them and left them at a loss. They realized that they knew each other very poorly, but their mutual love covered this insignificant deficiency. They answered every question cheerfully, unequivocally assuring their counselor that not everything he told them was so important, because they loved each other so deeply. They had only one question for the pastor: 'When can he perform their wedding ceremony?' But when they understood that they had no chance until they completed their premarital counseling, they decided to go through this formal procedure and joyfully awaited the moment when they could finally say the long-awaited 'I do. I do.' to the whole world.

During another meeting, she decided to sit on her boyfriend's lap so that she could be closer to him in their embrace. They felt so good together while spending time this way that they lost all sense of time. Their hands no longer recognized any boundaries and increasingly delighted their hearts through accidental yet pleasurable caresses. They loved each other so much that they no longer had any barriers within their personal space. Yet some invisible force restrained their feelings, suggesting that they should wait a little and not develop before the wedding what they so greatly desired to experience in order to strengthen their mutual love even further.

At last, their union received approval, and this became the main factor restraining their intimacy. They joyfully decided to wait for the wedding celebration and afterward continue their relationship in the way they desired.

But our friends had other friends who had also met one another, yet decided not to touch each other until they understood how well suited they were and whether God approved their relationship. They prayed often for one another,

read books together about building a family and raising children, and sought people who could give them wise advice for building family happiness. Brief sessions during premarital counseling were not enough for them. They sought additional people who could share their life experience and explain what a happy family should—and should not—be like. They wrote every valuable thought and piece of advice in a notebook so that they could discuss it together later and surrender it to God in prayer. They did not hurry toward a wedding date, understanding that everything should be approached wisely and have God's blessing. They enjoyed communicating with each other, but did not neglect their other responsibilities, joyfully carrying out their daily duties.

When people asked about their wedding, they modestly replied that they still knew each other poorly and did not want to make a mistake by getting ahead of events.

The period of their friendship became a time of fasting and prayer. They greatly desired the approval of God, their parents, and the church. Although they felt a personal attraction toward each other, they understood that feelings are not a very reliable counselor. Therefore, they decided to approach their friendship with sober judgment.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Genesis 3:7; 6:1–5; 24:2–4, 11–14, 19–21, 58–61; 29:10–12; Proverbs 6:20–25; Hebrews 13:21; Ephesians 3:16–19; Revelation 14:4; Romans 8:14; 1 John 4:11.

## Herein Is My Father Glorified

Knowing God and knowing His will bring me into a close relationship with the Savior, and within this relationship I open myself to Him just as I am. It is very easy for me to be in the presence of the One from Whom I have no secrets, to Whom I can tell everything, and Who respects my choice and does not break me. God is the Being dearest and closest to my soul, and He Himself created me for Him. When my life merges with His life, it is such a natural condition of the soul and feels so good that I never want to leave it.

But I am not alone in this world. People surround me. Some are very close to me, while others are close both to me and to God. None of them are like me. They are different or even completely opposite, yet they are interesting.

The Lord commanded me to love these people. But why do I need this? I have Jesus, and I feel so good with Him. People bring only problems, and the more people there are, the more problems there are. And starting a family means allowing a lifelong problem into your life! No, it is better for me to remain alone. I will marry Christ and have a relationship only with Him.

But this decision encounters some inconvenient Bible verses that say that if I love God, I must also love my neighbor. I do not know how to love my neighbor, and when I begin trying, I fail.

When I speak about God, everything in the conversation centers upon God, and I feel at peace. But when I begin speaking or listening to others speak about love for one another, I enter a world of all kinds of laws and interconnections, examples and rules, theories and conjectures. Often, throughout all of this, the Holy Name is not heard at all—only various human conclusions about love and its influence.

It is written: ‘God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.’ 1 John 4:16. I agree that God is love. But can I say that love is God? No such definition appears in the

Bible. Yet it is precisely within my love that He reveals Himself and bears much fruit.

I know Christ's declaration that if I abide in Him as the Vine, I will bear much fruit. In my fellowship with Him, I love Him, rejoice, have peace, and exercise longsuffering as I wait for answers to prayer. I am kind to Jesus and want to embrace Him. I show Him mercy and have faith in Him. In fellowship with Him, I am meek and abstain from every evil. It feels so good to bear much fruit in my relationship with Him! I could live this way forever.

But when difficult people enter my life, all my fruit seems to evaporate. I understand that I am poor and find it difficult to give them what I can give Jesus. Yet the commandment to love one another involves mutual love. Therefore, I wait for someone who will love me, and then I will certainly love that person in return, and we will bear much fruit. This is how we will love one another: we will speak to each other about Jesus, and through such fellowship we will draw closer to one another. Seeing my love for Jesus, my neighbor will love me as well, and I will respond in the same way. If someone does not love me, that person is not a friend, and there is no reason to spend time on him.

What a wonderful plan I have invented! Now I am ready to love a friend. Friend, where are you? Hello! I am ready to love you! Come, and we will enjoy being together—if you meet my criteria.

Unfortunately, this kind of relationship scenario occurs quite often. We may even hear the accusation that Christ is absent from our reflections about love and that, even on the Sabbath, we permit ourselves to speak about loving one another. We accept statements like these and answer everyone at once through this lesson.

If I bear much fruit in my personal fellowship with God but do not have this fruit in my interactions with my neighbors, how should I understand this phenomenon? From the illustration of the Vine, I conclude that fruit is produced not for the Vine, but

for those who come to the Vine. Love is the foundational element in every other quality of the fruit.

When I ask God for love, He begins endowing me with it. Love forms my heart in God’s likeness, and it becomes easy for me to love those around me. Love is a verb, and it does not need to be proven. Everyone can see it.

By loving my neighbors, I learn what I did not know how to do before. I can practice this alone and fail to understand whether I am acting correctly. But when I fellowship with people who, like me, have decided to love their neighbors, we exchange experiences, share revelations, and warn one another about dangers. The world contains many counterfeits of love, and for many people the word is associated with something lustful and earthly. Therefore, in our fellowship we should separate the pure from the impure and continue forward.

Love is a Name of God, and He Himself writes it upon my consciousness and desires to see it in my life—not only in my relationship with Him, but also in my relationship with my neighbors.

When love fills me, it naturally and effortlessly spreads to everyone around me. Each person receives as much as he is able to receive. I do not say much to these people about God. I simply love them, and this relationship binds us with the invisible bonds of agape. If I have gone out to sow love, one day I will begin reaping what I have sown. There is nothing strange about this. This law works. But the seed does not germinate in every heart. If it is sown by the wayside or among thorns, there will be no good harvest.

And what do I see in my relationships with those I love? The fruit of the Holy Spirit. It does not even need to be proven. It simply ripens within our relationships and gladdens our hearts with its freshness and relevance.

For many, many years, I studied the law, truth, and doctrines and attended all kinds of seminars, meetings, and conferences. I grew in this knowledge and could recognize any error very quickly and present irrefutable evidence against it. Yet I never

learned to love the people with whom I interacted. I understood that I resembled a learned Pharisee or legal expert more than a disciple of Christ. Without love, my entire religion was as dry as the Sahara Desert. Fortunately, I realized this and began asking for changes within my heart and for that very agape without which I am nothing. God heard and answered, and He began instructing me. I thought I would immediately become a professor of love, live within it, and amaze everyone. In reality, however, I saw how much garbage was stored within my soul and that love first needed to remove all of it before it could begin to grow. But the process had begun, and there was no turning back.

In these lessons, you are now tasting the blessings that I became able to share with you after many years. God required so much time to teach me. I am comprehending this science together with you, and God is present in every one of our lessons, because without Him we will understand nothing.

God greatly enjoys seeing much fruit within our relationships with one another, and we cannot hide it. This fruit exists, and it is indisputable evidence that the One Who is Love is with us. Yet we do not try to prove this to anyone or even stop to think about it. We simply love one another and thank God for it.

If someone has decided to leave us, that is his choice. We are learning to love one another—to love as the Lord desires—and we are succeeding. There is no form or majesty within us that would attract others to us. But we have God, Who abides in us, and we abide in Him.

If you are not yet with us, it is difficult for you to understand what is within us or where our God is in our fellowship. But we are closed to no one. Welcome.

Bible Verses for Reflection

2 Timothy 3:5; 1 John 4:11–12; Matthew 5:46–48; 19:10–11; 23:25; John 13:34–35; 15:1–5; Isaiah 53:2–3; 1 Peter 1:22; Proverbs 18:22; 21:9, 19; 25:24; 1 John 4:20–21; Luke 11:44–46; Ecclesiastes 2:14; Revelation 14:1.

## Healthy Conditions for Friendship

In 2008, my wife and I rented a plot of land near our home and began creating our own vegetable garden. I did not know how anything grew, so I prepared the soil intuitively, sifting out the stones and adding compost and manure to the remaining earth. As a result, everything I planted grew. I decided not to add chemical fertilizers to the soil or spray my plants with anything.

Over the years, I came to understand that garden plants have their own laws of planting, growth, and development. What is suitable for one is not always acceptable for another. Some plants need frequent watering, while others should not be watered so often.

Once, after buying several blueberry bushes, I planted them in ordinary soil and waited for a rich harvest. During the first year, they produced a few berries from their own reserves. In the second year, they began to wither and die, although every branch still clung to life. I realized that I was doing something wrong and decided to ask experts what I should do. It turned out that this crop needs acidic soil that must not come into contact with ordinary ground. I dug a deep hole, lined it with plastic, filled it with what the professionals recommended, and mixed everything thoroughly. As a result, the blueberries revived and began delighting me every year with an abundant harvest.

My fruit trees also require care, pruning, and protection from ants. When I do everything necessary, I rejoice in a rich abundance of berries and fruit. The trees that bear no fruit I cut down and replace with others.

Because of the abundant harvest from my garden, I became known among my neighbors as an experienced gardener who grows all the most delicious produce in large quantities. I do not consider myself such a gardener, because I do almost nothing. I merely create favorable conditions for the plants to live, and afterward they take care of themselves.

But I noticed that various pests also enjoy my harvest. Because I do not spray anything with anything, the ‘fruit eaters’ appreciated this and took note of it. God’s creatures also need something to eat.

I also noticed that weeds grow everywhere and all by themselves, requiring no care or attention. The longer you fail to notice them, the larger they become. At the beginning of their growth, they can be pulled out and thrown away easily. Later, however, they must be dug up, and removing them requires considerable time and effort.

I also have a greenhouse where delicate tomatoes grow and require special care and support. Growing them takes most of my time. But at the appointed time, the tomatoes produce so much fruit that I am able to share it with many people around me.

Relationships between people remind me in some ways of the laws governing plant life. Some good people, when placed in an unfavorable environment, begin to wither and die spiritually. Others, like pests entering a good community, begin destroying everything good and cultivated around them. There can be no discussion of good fruit; the challenge is simply to preserve whatever remains alive. Yet because the pest is a human being, that person must also be cared for and given proper attention. In the end, we see what we have and wonder where the fruit is.

Love for one another has certain laws that remain constant and firm whether I know them or not. When two people decide to love one another, both must mutually ensure that their love remains love rather than becoming a vacuum cleaner that sucks everything in and gives nothing back. Love for one another develops only when both friends create healthy conditions for their relationship, invest their hearts in it, and make sure that no alien spirit enters their union. When both faithfully maintain all these conditions, fruit soon appears, begins developing rapidly, and nourishes the people who love one another. Other people also have an opportunity to taste something from this friendship. The influence of loving people extends very far, and

the fruit of their love becomes exceedingly delicious, nourishing everyone around them.

Knowing the flavor, power, and influence of love, Jesus commanded us to possess it within our relationships. At the end of time, He desires to sell all of this to us under the symbols of heavenly treasures, teaching us to live in what we have acquired.

Nowhere does fruit grow as beautifully as within our love for one another. We create ideal greenhouse conditions for it. Through the kindness of our hearts, our mutual faith in God, and our unity of thought and spirit, we warm the tender plant of our love and protect it from destructive attacks. People outside have no access to the greenhouse of our love for one another. Therefore, it remains under the special protection of our choice to love and to be tender, principled, and faithful within this love.

The enemy of the soul hates unions like these and sends his pests to introduce distrust and suspicion into our relationship through gossip, whispering accusations, ridicule, envy, and other sins. Here we must remain vigilant, identifying strange fire that does not warm, but burns and destroys everything good from within.

When caring for plants, I exercise special wisdom. I make sure that every law is properly observed; otherwise, I will have no harvest, and everything will perish. Yet for some reason, in love for one another, I decide that no care is necessary and that the plant will somehow grow strong by itself. Then I sit among the ruins of friendship and wonder why my friend lost heart so quickly when I periodically took bites out of him to test the strength of his love. Although he says that he loves me, he no longer draws close to me because he desires to remain healthy. Naturally, this provokes my faultfinding and mockery of such love.

A spirit like this destroys the closest attachment from within. You should not blame the separation upon your loving friend,

who decided in faith to build a friendship with you and accepted everything except your open hostility toward him.

Love for one another is an extremely delicate plant that needs an atmosphere of love from both sides. It is highly sensitive to anything that can kill it. Therefore, every outside struggle and fall should be left beyond the boundaries of the friendship. We should not reveal an alien spirit in an attempt to test a friend's strength. The friend may endure, but the plant is in danger of dying.

Sometimes a friend may be depressed because something has weighed him down or because he has fallen. Although this information is sad, it tells us that somewhere in the friend's life the conditions are not favorable for healthy living and that he does not know how to conduct himself in the situation. At that moment, your fresh and optimistic perspective from outside can help turn all your friend's problems to good, find a way out through the choice of happiness, and continue walking this path together, finding the road to victory.

If my friend and I do not fight for the purity and warmth of our relationship and do not treasure it, it will soon end. Then we will be astonished that our friend suddenly turned out not to be genuine.

The fruit of the Spirit does not grow like a weed just anywhere. It grows and bears fruit only under particular conditions that I —or my friend and I together—create for it.

I can love an enemy and one-sidedly distribute holy things and pearls abundantly to those who do not value them. But within a relationship with a friend, everything must be done with love and special tenderness.

Bible Verses for Reflection

Galatians 6:7; 1 Peter 1:22; Romans 8:14; 12:9–10, 16; Proverbs 14:1; 17:9, 17; 18:24; 22:11; Song of Solomon 7:11; Matthew 7:6, 16; 13:18–23; Isaiah 5:21; Revelation 3:18; John 13:34–35; Galatians 5:15, 22–23.

## The Mystery of Family and Friendship

If you ask people you know why families are formed and what a family is, you will most likely hear answers such as these:

So that a person will not be alone or die of boredom;

To give birth to and raise children;

To carry out a shared ministry;

So that the human race will not come to an end;

To have the lawful right of access to the body of one's marriage partner;

To receive a spouse's inheritance and wealth;

So that someone will care for you and feed you;

So that, so that, so that…

The family is the most amazing and diverse unit within any society. Every nation flourishes through the family. The family is the place where a person's soul finds peace and comfort, rests, and gains strength for a new workday.

If you ask better-informed specialists about the purpose of starting a family, they will tell you that the most important part of the relationship is coming to know one another and continually discovering new qualities in one's partner. The Lord and His Word must be the foundation of this relationship. When people understand the purpose and possess a firm foundation, they can build and plan anything.

The family was established by God and given to humanity at Creation. By gaining a family, a person receives something important that is part of his very nature. Ideally, all people should live in families or have good families of their own for wholesome relationships. But what do we see? The enemy of the soul destroys everything God designed and presents the world with a mirage that is difficult to pursue.

Yet God’s plan for the family remains in force. It must be studied, put into practice, and presented to the world as an unshakable monument to the Lord’s love and wisdom embodied in human beings.

According to God’s design, friendship should be present in every relationship between people and continually gladden our hearts with an abundance of warmth and light through such heartfelt interaction.

Love binds the souls of people and friends into something beautiful and makes our relationships delightful and valuable, genuine and interesting.

The Eternity for which we all wait will contain all these elements of God’s design. According to these very laws, we will grow and develop throughout the unceasing years of Eternity. We do not know what families will be like there, how the daily lives of the redeemed will be arranged, or what heavenly celebrations will look like. But we can say that everyone will be joyful and very happy.

God’s design for the last days, however, is to restore the ruins of human relationships and reveal to the entire visible and invisible world God’s glory written within the hearts of Christ’s followers.

The love for one another that Jesus commanded us to possess before His death is God’s primary strategic plan for the last days. Although love has always been relevant and needed, because iniquity has abounded, the love of many has grown cold. In people’s minds it has become like medieval ruins that many do not wish to approach. But the Lord desires to plant His banner in this territory and in this very way overcome every sin.

Friendship gives me another person as a human being with whom I can have friendly relations and close bonds, carry out a shared ministry, and do many good things for each other and for those around us. Love for one another makes this relationship special, sincere, and united in heart.

Faith in God and unity of thought create favorable soil for a relationship of friendship and love. When we enter this path by making a mutual decision to become friends and love one another, we invite the Godhead into our lives. The seed of love sown within our hearts begins to germinate and bear abundant fruit—much fruit.

Love for one another lifts for loving people the veil over the relationship that exists within God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In loving a friend, I gain Eternity within this relationship, understanding that I have approached an endlessly beautiful object for profound study. This study will never end, but will continually gladden me with its discoveries and with the blessings contained in the deep recesses of my friend's heart. Throughout all this discovery, God's seal of the infinite wisdom and creative power of our dear Creator will be present.

Nowhere does God reveal Himself as deeply and accessibly as within our love for one another. The Bible introduces us to the truth about God. Nature reveals the Creator's beauty and majesty. Jesus shows us the magnificence of God's character. Love for one another embodies all this knowledge and the knowledge of God in the practice and reality of our lives—not excluding God from our relationship, but revealing Him even more deeply within this mutual love. As a result of such a relationship, continual praise and gratitude rise from our lips to the One Who has arranged everything so wonderfully.

A person who has not been born from Above cannot love, because he has no access to this Source of life. But through personally knowing Jesus as one's Savior, these springs are opened to the thirsty soul. As the soul is satisfied, it seeks ways to glorify God.

Herein is the Father glorified: that, while connected to Jesus, we begin loving one another and bear much fruit of the Holy Spirit within this love.

Building a happy family is a good plan, and true happiness has laws that are worth knowing and observing. Ideally, people who

believe in God and share unity of faith would first become friends and, within this friendship, decide to love one another always. Then, rejoicing in this love, they would choose a life partner with whom they would decide to establish a happy family union. Then there would be no family conflicts, no divorces, and no children effectively orphaned while both parents are still alive.

Love for one another is the great mystery of God’s presence within the relationship of two people. When these loving friends decide to enter into marriage, this spiritual mystery becomes even more incomprehensible from outside, yet opens its doors to a profound knowledge of one another and of God within the relationship. And this mystery is very great.

When I first set out upon the path of love for one another, I already understand that I am plunging into something great and inaccessible that I did not know before. Establishing a family within such a union of two friends is an unfathomable universe with all its amazing mysteries and discoveries, which you come to know from within.

To understand how incomprehensible everything I am describing is, try to explain why Christ needs a bride whom He plans to marry, as the Bible tells us. This is an unfathomable mystery that will soon become reality. It will reveal the beauty of the relationship to the bride from within and give the entire universe something to contemplate as it seeks to unravel this great mystery.

This is why the enemy of the soul now attacks the institution of the family so furiously, seeking to make it a curse and an unbearable burden for humanity.

But God’s plans are being fulfilled despite everything. Love is making a way. Those who desire to enter the path of love will learn through their own experience the advantage of such a life and will never again choose anything else.

For a very long time, the enemy imposed his abominations upon the world. Now the time has come to love. The time has come for God to act, for they have made void His law.

Where will I stand in this conflict? I alone decide.

Where will you stand, my friend? The decision is yours.

Shall we unite in love for one another and see that the Lord is good?

Bible Verses for Reflection

1 Peter 1:22; 1 Corinthians 1:4–10; 3:10–17; 4:1–2; 13:12–13; Ecclesiastes 3:1, 8; Psalm 119:126; Colossians 3:18–19; Ephesians 5:25, 31–33; Revelation 19:7–9; 21:2; John 13:34–35.

## ‘…We Have Fellowship One with Another…’

In 1 John 1:7, the Bible contains an interesting verse with a promise: ‘But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin.’

When I decide to obey God’s commandment to love one another, which Jesus gave us three times before His death, I understand that I need at least one friend who has made the same decision regarding me. I do not go into the world to look for such a person. He must walk in the light, and we must share one faith. Fortunately, there are very many unusual people like us, but like salt, we are scattered throughout the world to preserve it from corruption. The world does not even realize that because of our presence within it, the Lord restrains His cleansing judgments, although in some places this merciful attitude toward human lawlessness is already becoming impossible.

Then we notice each other and decide upon mutual love. This is the most interesting and beautiful beginning of any friendship and any relationship. Although we do not know what will come of it, we are prepared to venture into this lifelong experiment. The light in which we already walk becomes our shared possession, and we willingly share our personal revelations.

Having become accustomed in our solitude to fellowship with Jesus, we do not lose this connection with Heaven when entering a new friendship, but bring it into our relationship. We know how the Lord convicts us of our sins and how He does this through various direct rebukes, through His Word, and through our conscience. But how will He cleanse us from all sin within our friendship? We understand that if we begin judging one another, searching for each other’s faults, and pointing out secret sins, our relationship will die very quickly. Our love will grow cold because iniquity has abounded. We will lose interest in communicating and soon forget the decisions we made regarding one another.

Not everyone enjoys being judged and rebuked, especially for something of which they are not guilty. Yet people tend to see their own spiritual problems in others, and being subjected to such an assessment is extremely unpleasant.

Love teaches us to treat our neighbors tenderly and maintain friendly fellowship in which we conduct ourselves very carefully, understanding that our unkind words can destroy our relationship.

Yet fellowship with a friend exists and continues naturally. Through it, we discover another person's world and share with him our experiences and the secrets of our souls. Although my friend cannot always help me, the closer he becomes, the deeper I desire to welcome him into my heart. Once you have taken him into the depths of a personal relationship, you realize how close you have become within this spiritual union of love and friendship.

As I fellowship with a friend, I share my experiences of victory over sin. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, I may indirectly point to something wrong in his life by explaining how I discovered lawlessness within myself and how I struggled against it, overcoming it through the power and grace of Christ. It is not I, but the Holy Spirit Who begins stirring my friend's heart through my experiences of victory and drawing him to repentance. My friend understands that he needs power from Above to abandon his vices. He turns to the Lord of hosts for help and receives it. The blood of Christ washes us from every sin we discover within ourselves under the influence from Above. Later, my friend tells me how my experiences convicted him, how he repented, and how he is now clean before God in this matter. I rejoice that the Holy Spirit used me in this way and lovingly accomplished what I could never have done. I judged no one and never even intended to rebuke anyone.

While listening to my friend's stories, I sometimes understand that the Holy Spirit is also addressing me and desires to expose a secret sin known only to me. Yet under the influence of my friend's words or attitude, it has become clear to me, and I must do something about it. I understand that my sin is

repulsive to God, and I come to Him in secret prayer or decide to ask my friend for prayerful support. Then together we confess my sin and ask for a blessing and power from Above to overcome every evil.

Our mutual love reveals much that is good and some things that are not good. Sometimes it kills evil within me at the very root without calling it by name, boldly planting its banner and resolving problems at the subconscious level.

We spend joyful time together in a friendly relationship without even realizing what a tremendous work God's love is accomplishing within our hearts because of our heartfelt attachment to each other. We love one another from a pure heart, and within this love all our inborn vices—things we do not even want to name—dissolve.

Our knowledge of the truth helps us build our relationship in the right spirit and in the light of God's law and sound judgment. All our feelings remain under the control of reason and will. Although we are not deprived of pleasant experiences or hormonal attacks, the light in which we walk firmly restrains everything taking place within us. We are honest with each other and are not afraid to speak about the inner processes of our hearts or about our thoughts and feelings, because we desire support and understanding from our friend. This very fellowship protects us from many temptations.

It should be noted that if my friend is of the opposite sex, we immediately establish boundaries in our communication and discuss them soberly, agreeing to maintain our friendship within the framework we have established. This protects us from every temptation. Modern means of communication help us maintain our relationship and living fellowship even when we are very far from each other.

The friendship and love between us will not necessarily lead to marriage, but will continually gladden our hearts with their newness and with amazing discoveries of new depths within the relationship. Yet starting a family with someone whom you do not love and do not know as a friend is a rather risky

undertaking. We should not hurry or make hasty decisions in this matter.

Love and friendship are possible even over the telephone. They are in no way less than love and friendship experienced through in-person contact with a friend, while distance protects us from many temptations.

Our fellowship is diverse. It has no particular laws or rules and depends upon what we desire to make of it. When the apostle John wrote his epistle, he did not mean daily communication through modern technology. He was making it clear that fellowship between friends must exist and that it must take place in the right spirit and light.

We ourselves choose the subject of our fellowship, how frequently we will speak, and how long our conversations will last. Sound judgment, mutual agreement, and purity of heart in the light of God’s law must be present in everything.

Jesus gave us this commandment for our happiness, and He adds His blessing to our love and friendship, participating in everything we build within our relationship. The Lord knows that our love for one another makes us fit for heavenly life among holy beings. They eagerly await our return home, but do not want to be placed at risk by our closed and hardened hearts.

Love for one another teaches us to live according to the laws of Heaven, which we will enter very soon.

Bible Verses for Reflection

1 John 1:3–10; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 13:4–8; 2 Corinthians 6:14–16; 13:13; 1 Peter 1:22; Romans 12:9–10; 1 Timothy 1:5; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:3; 3:5; Colossians 3:14; Philippians 2:1–5.

## A Foretaste of Eternity

My life unfolded in such a way that until I was twenty-four, I did not know God and had no knowledge of eternal life. Soviet schools had shaped within me the thinking of an atheist. I understood only that one day my life would end and afterward there would be nothing. It was difficult for me to comprehend that I would no longer exist while this world continued developing according to its laws and I would know nothing about it. Somehow, life lost its meaning, because I had been born only to die.

But light entered my life. I came to know the truth, and it made me free. In a prayer of repentance, I gave all my sins to God and entrusted my life into the hands of Jesus. From that moment, a new reckoning of time began for me. All my habits began to change, and my thoughts turned toward heavenly truths. Eternal life became my new reality, and knowing Christ became my new occupation.

I did not yet belong to any church, but I knew clearly that I belonged to God. Salvation was mine, and the Holy Spirit showed me how to continue living with my new faith and how to develop it. My independent study at home became the pattern of my new life. It always maintained my spiritual condition and nourished me with heavenly manna. I thought that eternal life would begin at Christ's Second Coming and that the present was merely preparation for that event. But the Bible revealed to me that by believing in Jesus, I already possess this life. How wonderful it is to understand that you are already an eternal citizen of the Heavenly Kingdom.

After finding God's church with true teaching, I decided to join this movement and become a member of the body of Christ. I was joyfully welcomed into the Christian family, and I gained brothers and sisters. I read in the Bible that we are commanded to love one another and decided that my kind attitude toward fellow believers was the love the Lord desired to see within me. As long as there were no trials, my love adapted very successfully to any community and any people. But when

conflicts or disputed opinions arose, I understood that not all my fellow believers were saints and that I myself had not yet reached the heights of righteous living I dreamed of conquering.

All my Christian experience led me, after sixteen years of life with Christ, to understand a very important truth: I did not possess agape love. Without it, I was nothing, and all my knowledge brought me no benefit. But I knew that God is Love, and this moved me to ask desperately for this love for myself. The Lord answered and gave me to understand that my prayer had been heard. Something happened to my worldview, and I began seeing the world, my family, and my fellow believers through the eyes of a loving person. It was fascinating to understand that I loved. I could not have imagined a better position in life. Every day, the Lord revealed new facets and laws of His love to me, which I tried to put into practice and share with others. At that time, I did not yet know what to do with all my revelations and wrote nothing down for other people. I thought that because I loved people, I knew how to love according to the commandment, and I boldly shared my discoveries in this area. Yet all my experience came down to this: I would find another friend, reach an agreement with him to love one another, and our relationship would remain at the level it had reached without developing further. Lacking experience in developing relationships like these, I considered this to be love for one another. I will not say that there was no love between us, and I love everyone whom the Lord gives me. But everything is understood through comparison.

Then the Lord gave me another friend. As I had done with all the others, I offered him friendship and later love for one another. But this friend was not like my other friends. He took an active role in developing our relationship without violating my freedom, while desiring that I respect his freedom of choice as well. Our relationship developed successfully and continues developing to this day. I have described earlier what began opening before me in my new friendship and love for this person, trying to convey the full depth of these experiences.

It is so fascinating to welcome into your life something great and inaccessible that you did not know before because you never even imagined it could be possible on our sinful Earth. The inner world of a friend, which also reveals you in the process, is that unexplored realm within God's children that remains a blank spot in the lives of many believers.

The deep inner world of a friend's soul is an inaccessible realm of endless research and discovery into which angels long to look, while we do not even suspect that it is possible. It is good to know that my neighbor is a boundless world and an unexplored planet of unusual blessings, but such knowledge provides little benefit if it is not personally connected with you. Yet when I touch my friend's soul and immerse myself in his loving heart, I am amazed by how many of God's blessings are concealed within this extraordinary knowledge of one another. Blessings like these come only through mutual love. Love is the little key to the treasury of a friend's heart. It can open everything and show you something great and inaccessible within human relationships that you simply did not know before.

When I look at a papaya, listen to descriptions of how delicious and beneficial it is and what its flavor resembles, attend lectures about the beauty of its aroma, and watch how it should properly be eaten, I will never know or understand what it truly tastes like until I taste it myself. The same is true of love for one another: it is impossible to appreciate another person's experience fully until you yourself taste the fruit of an eternal relationship by having a loving friend of your own.

I imagined how wonderful it would be for us in Eternity, where everyone would think about your happiness and you would think about others. There, everyone will be able to love his neighbor unconditionally, and no boundaries or temptations will remain within this pure love. But that will be there, later—perhaps for me as well, if I enter that place. Yet why wait for this 'later' when it surrounds you here and now? Why dream about a beautiful, distant future when we ourselves can create it today by making a mutual decision to love one another

according to Christ’s commandment and asking Him to teach us to obey it?

We proclaim to the entire world that God’s law is holy and that the commandments must be kept. Yet at the same time, we remain ignorant about keeping the Lord’s commandment to love one another. Or, at best, we assume that we keep it because we are God’s children and one family. But even within an earthly family, love for one another does not exist unless both people have made a conscious decision or understand what love is. Everything will be conditional and relative.

Love for one another reveals to me the mystery of eternal life within an endlessly beautiful relationship with my neighbor. Even now, I taste God within our mutual love and understand that without Him we can do nothing, that He is present within our friendship, and that He reveals Himself to us through our experiences of close fellowship. In creating us, the Lord intended to present to the entire world a miniature likeness of Himself and His image, so that through our visible relationships He might partially reveal to the whole universe the mystery of divine relationships. We reveal this to the world through our mutual love for one another.

Bible Verses for Reflection

John 13:34–35; 14:15; 15:10–17; 1 John 1:5–6; 5:1–3, 12–13; Deuteronomy 8:5–11; 1 Corinthians 2:9; 13:1–3; Jeremiah 33:3; Proverbs 17:17; 1 Peter 1:22; Revelation 22:14; Psalm 8:3–5.

## Love for One Another Is…

Jesus gave us a new commandment: ‘That ye love one another.’ He expects us to obey it. To many of us, it may seem new, and to some, entirely new. What it means can be understood only through experience—by living in obedience to this word and seeing its power within our lives.

Love for one another is the stage of faith at which I witness not only how my love for my neighbor influences him, but also become the object of my friend’s love and feel within my own heart the touch of heavenly Agape upon the strings of my soul.

Love for one another is a mutual exchange of the finest attitude imaginable—one formed in the depths of God’s heart so that it may afterward become humanity’s possession.

Love for one another is an invitation for God to enter our fellowship and permission for our wills to become channels of God’s grace toward us.

Love for one another is the most beautiful feeling and the most amazing relationship between two people who can share the most precious treasures of their souls without fear of being ridiculed or misunderstood.

Love for one another is childlike trust and complete sincerity within a relationship in which I am not ashamed to be myself and can freely share with my friend what fills my heart, while seeing exactly the same openness from him.

Love for one another is a tender, mutual touch upon the most distant corners of our hearts and a deep immersion into a friend’s soul, so that at the depth we have reached we may discover new mysteries within it that we never even imagined.

Love for one another is comprehending something great and inaccessible whose existence you did not know about, but which you now possess within your life. You cannot believe that you have become the owner of such a wonderful discovery, which is now your eternal possession.

Love for one another is the highest-quality life imaginable. It is so beautiful that its very existence is difficult to believe. Yet it exists, and it exists within your life.

Love for one another is the continual mutual discovery of new qualities and the joyful sharing of them. These discoveries never cease to amaze us as they reveal how interesting we are.

Love for one another is the visible fruit of the Holy Spirit, which can be tasted at any time while enjoying the fragrance of eternal life and being filled with power from Above for new love.

Love for one another is the fullest revelation of all the beauty of eternal life that we possess through faith in Jesus and that becomes within us a living spring satisfying our thirst.

Love for one another is something of which we can never have too much, but which we may enjoy in any quantity and at any time without risking disgust from an abundance of positive emotions.

Love for one another is the natural condition of the soul of a person who has finally returned to the Creator’s original design —the design violated in Eden, but now being restored within our lives and returning us to harmony with God.

Love for one another is continual, natural thought about the happiness of a friend who is constantly occupied with thinking about your happiness and doing everything possible so that you will be happy with him.

Love for one another is pure thoughts, pure relationships, pure and right motives, pure and holy conduct, and pure fellowship about pure subjects.

Love for one another is the complete acceptance of another person into your life and a profound mutual knowledge that enables us continually to rejoice in the new discoveries of our exploration and enrich one another through them.

Love for one another is God’s blessing, which with unchanging constancy enriches each one of us and the Lord Himself and adds no sorrow with it.

Love for one another is genuine love for one’s neighbor, which reveals itself naturally and does not attempt to play a role.

Love for one another is you and I, united by God so that within this union of love we may never be separated again, but may develop our relationship throughout our earthly lives and take it with us into Eternity, so that after endlessly long years we may understand the simple truth that love never fails.

Love for one another is what many people do not possess in their lives, although they think they live within it without even attempting to understand what it is or whether they possess it.

Love for one another is the finest heavenly relationship given to human beings for a deeper knowledge of God from within themselves. It is also a unique opportunity to allow Heaven to know us through the beauty of new discoveries in our character and the unique qualities of our souls, into which angels desire to look.

Love for one another is heavenly harmony within a relationship that shows us the beauty of heavenly life even now.

Love for one another is profound esteem, respect, and sensitivity toward each other’s lives. It is joy and mutual acceptance.

Love for one another is God’s presence within every action, thought, and feeling, producing an almighty creative power that rapidly and mightily changes and transforms everything and everyone around us.

Love for one another is an abundance of the fruit of the Holy Spirit through which the Father is glorified within our relationship.

Love for one another is the healing of the soul and the restoration of God’s image within us after the likeness of His beloved Son.

Love for one another is complete freedom to choose how to build a relationship, when and how often to interact, what to do, how long to communicate, and what to discuss.

Love for one another is the construction of the strongest relationship upon the firmest Foundation, Who is Jesus.

Love for one another is a beautiful foundation for starting a family, if the status of both friends permits it and their interest in one another opens their hearts to closer possibilities within the boundaries of God’s law.

Love for one another is love and friendship even within family relationships, binding husband and wife together into one whole and complete person.

Love for one another is God’s plan for the last days, revealed to those who have entered this path.

Love for one another is something entirely new, delightful, unusual, interesting, entertaining, fascinating, right, and blessed from Above.

Love for one another is the natural way of thinking of a righteous person who, while beholding God’s glory, is changed into the same image from glory to glory.

Love for one another is the successful burial of the old man and victory over my selfishness.

Love for one another is not only you, me, and the two of us together, but also new friends for new relationships and new discoveries.

Love for one another is natural happiness of heavenly origin that accompanies us in all our daily activities.

Love for one another is making new plans each day for a friend’s happiness and successfully carrying them out within our relationship.

Love for one another is a ray of light in the kingdom of darkness, living water in an ocean of garbage, meaning within the vanity of earthly life, and much else that the world cannot give.

Love for one another is what shows the world Whose disciples we are and draws new hearts to Jesus.

Love for one another is…

Bible Verses for Reflection

John 13:34–35; 1 Peter 1:22; Proverbs 17:17; 18:24; 1 Corinthians 13:4–8; 1 John 3:11, 23–24; 4:7–11.

## Jesus in Our Love for One Another

Love for one another is the most beautiful thing anyone could wish for a person.

It should be noted that we are not given detailed instructions for a relationship like this. Yet we can fully rely upon Christ's personal presence within this mutual decision. Through the Holy Spirit, He Himself begins teaching us this heavenly science while taking into account our mentality, education, needs, and thirst.

When I enter my friend's world and open my heart to him, we begin knowing one another from within and discovering an entirely different world and a different kind of relationship. God created us for love. When we return to God's original plan and learn through personal experience what lies within our friend's soul, we experience something special—something the world cannot give or reveal. Our mutual love binds us with the strongest bonds of agape and friendship, bonds that cannot simply be severed without pain.

The more I allow my friend to love me and give him the same love, the stronger our love and friendship become. Love for one another is not a superficial celebration lasting a couple of days, but a conscious and complete immersion into the world of one's neighbor and an emotional attachment to his heart.

At this level of relationship, a sense of danger arises, along with the question of whether I love my friend more than Jesus. Has this person who is dear to my heart become closer to me than my dear Savior? Or perhaps I have taken Christ's place within my friend's heart? These are extremely serious questions that deserve attention.

This creates a dilemma. We begin obeying Christ's commandment to love one another because we love Jesus and desire to obey Him in everything. Yet as we come to know and love one another, we become so dear and close and open ourselves so deeply that we begin to fear whether God will punish us out of jealousy, because within our friendship and

mutual love we no longer give the Lord as much time and attention as we did before.

But if my friend and I decide not to draw as close as our hearts desire, but instead maintain distance within the relationship so that we may give God His proper time and place, will our love for one another turn into a strange performance? It is difficult to give a direct answer to all these questions, because there are no clear instructions concerning them.

I would like to share an example from life that may shed some light upon what is taking place.

When my adult children live in my home and are already able to choose their own path, I continue caring for them, feeding them, taking an interest in their personal lives, and making sure that they keep me informed about their plans, movements, and acquaintances. I have the right to require them to come home and go to bed at a particular time. They can always approach me, and I can enter their personal space without a special invitation.

But then something happens that I notice immediately. My daughter introduces me to her new friend and, after some time, asks for my blessing upon their decision to establish a family. What should I do? I understand that she will never again spend cozy evenings with me by the fireplace. I will never again be able simply to walk into her room and talk about life. Moreover, she has almost no time left to devote to me. But as a wise father, I understand that I prepared her throughout her life for this very moment. Now I release her to sail independently upon the ship of her life companion. Although I never cease to be her father, our relationship is no longer the same.

I believe that our spiritual growth includes particular stages and transitions that God knows perfectly and toward which He leads us as we mature.

Eternity will be filled with all kinds of living beings who will lay claim to my time, heart, and mutual affection while giving themselves completely in return. What is God to do with children like these, who will think about one another’s

happiness from morning until evening and devote all their eternal time to it?

And what if another friend appears in my life and we decide to love one another? What if I gain more and more friends, we truly love one another, and our relationships become so close that everyone recognizes us as Christ's disciples? What should we do with this?

I cannot say that God is absent from our love for one another. He is present, but our relationship with Him has entered into our relationship with our friend. Although I continue setting aside time for personal prayer and spiritual reading, I notice that I spend more and more time with my friends and that they invest more and more of their time in me. How could it be otherwise? We love one another, and this love draws us toward those whom we love and who return our love.

It would be foolish to spend an entire lifetime asking God for a loving friend, dreaming of such a relationship, and studying this science, only to hide from friends after receiving the answer to these expectations and prayers because they have become so close and dear to me that such happiness frightens me. What if it is some kind of trap?

The Lord knows our dilemma and desires to comfort us regarding it. If I honestly share my concerns with Him and ask Him to destroy everything that emotionally binds me to my friend if it is extremely dangerous for me, yet the attachment does not disappear but instead becomes stronger and more joyful, should I sever this bond myself?

What should I tell my daughter if, after several months of life with her husband, she comes to me repenting that she gives her life companion all her best time and loves him so deeply that within this love she cannot spend as much time with me as before? Would I truly advise her to end the relationship? Or would I tell her that she was raised throughout her life for this very season?

The Lord knows perfectly what I will encounter within my love and friendship with my friend. Yet He is the One Who

commands me to love him. This means that within such a relationship I can rely upon His special presence in a way I have not experienced before. When I see the abundance of fruit the Holy Spirit produces within our friendship, I sense that I do not understand everything, but I become peaceful and continue forward.

Love for one another is a great mystery for the last days. The Lord desires to reveal it to those who enter this path and act according to His design—a design that awaited the participation of my friend and me.

Can I turn my friend into an idol and place him in Christ's position within our love for one another? My carnal heart desires precisely this, and the enemy of the soul will certainly incline either me or my friend toward such a turn of events. But God's Spirit will respond immediately to the situation and trouble the heart of the person whom someone is attempting to seat upon God's throne. A crisis in the relationship may occur, but the relationship will not be destroyed. A loving friend will gently make it clear that he is not Jesus and should not be burdened with everything or expected to provide something extraordinary. He is simply a human being and an ordinary friend who can love at all times and consider the heart of a matter, but cannot perform miracles or change destinies.

The Lord guards from evil the hearts of those who have decided to love one another and ask His blessing upon their love.

Bible Verses for Reflection

1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 Corinthians 4:5; 2 Corinthians 1:12; 1 Samuel 20:41–42; 2 Samuel 1:26; 1 Peter 1:22; Philippians 4:6–9; John 13:34–35; 1 John 3:11, 23–24; 4:7–8, 12, 21; Acts 10:25–26; 14:9–18; Revelation 19:10; Song of Solomon 7:10–11.