

Kick-off for 2017: THE YEAR OF HOPE
New Year's Day: BECOMING BEST FRIENDS WITH GOD

Happy New Year. I am excited to kick off our new year with you and our emphasis that 2017 is THE YEAR OF HOPE. I want us to focus for the next few minutes on how to become best friends with God. Why? Because HE is the very source of hope.

What kind of relationship does God really want with you? Have you ever thought about this? Your relationship to God has many aspects. God is your Father. He is your Creator. He is your Maker. He's your Judge. He's your Master. He's your Lord. He's your Redeemer. He's your Savior, and He has many more roles in your life. But most shocking of all is this: God wants you for a friend. This is an amazing truth. In James 4:8 the Bible says, "**Draw close to God, and God will draw close to you.**" To draw close to God I must first humble myself before Him. This means to yield to His authority and will, commit your life to Him and His control. Lately on our Connection Cards for prayer requests--and I am hearing from some of you, and I have heard it in my small group--is this desire to truly humble oneself and surrender to God's will and purposes and plans for their lives. This is a great way to start your relationship with Father God. When we want to know what a relationship with God looks like, we need simply to go back to the very beginning of time and look at the original ideal relationship in Eden. Why? Because when God created Adam and Eve they enjoyed this incredibly close intimate friendship with God. There was no religion. There were no rituals or rules except don't eat of that one tree. That was the only direction that was given to the first human couple. It was a real friendship that was characterized by God delighting in Adam and Eve, and they both delighted in their Creator God. This is the kind of relationship God wants to have with you today. It was just a simple loving relationship, and they were made to live in God's presence continually. And God has made you to live in His presence continually. But that ideal relationship was ruined by sin. Sin broke the friendship. Sin damaged and destroyed the fellowship. Their friendship with God was lost. When you go through the Old Testament there are a few persons called the friend of God.

Abraham was called a friend of God. Moses was a friend of God and so was David. The Bible says that both Moses and Enoch walked with God. But most of the people in the O.T. did not have a personal relationship with God. In fact most of the time guilt and fear was more common in relationship to God than was love and friendship.

The coming of Jesus Christ at His birth and then through His death, burial, resurrection and His ascension to the Father has changed this situation forever for those who choose to put their faith in Him. When Jesus died on the cross and paid for our sins, the Bible says that the veil between the Holy of Holies and the outer court, the holy place, was ripped from the top to the bottom symbolizing that the separation between God and man that had been going on for hundreds and thousands of year was no longer there. Jesus has built a new bridge so that was now no separation between us and God. Everyone has access. You don't need a priest or anyone else. You can go directly to God and have a personal relationship with Him. Romans 5:10-11 says, **“We were restored to friendship with God by the death of His Son while we were still His enemies, so we will certainly be delivered from eternal punishment by His life. Now, we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God--all because of what our Lord Jesus Christ has done for us in making us friends of God.”** Because of who Jesus is and what He did, you can have an intimate relationship with Father God. You can't buy friendship with God or earn it or be good enough to have a friendship with God. You can't bribe God or bargain with God or berate God into wanting a relationship with you. What you can do is receive God's gift which was paid for by Jesus Christ. He has forgiven your sins and He has provided the needed restoration and reconciliation of your relationship with God. It's God's grace and Jesus' sacrifice. In John 15:15 Jesus says this, **“I no longer call you servants. Instead, I call you My friends.”**

As we begin today, the first day of the YEAR OF HOPE in 2017 I want to give you some very practical steps on how you can deepen your friendship with God--regardless of how long you have had a friendship with God—and, if you don't, I want to encourage you to start your relationship with Him today, right

now. I have five practical actions you can take to begin and to deepen your relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

HOW TO DEVELOP A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD:

I. Make knowing God my #1 priority

You will never get to become a friend of God in your spare time. You must make knowing God your number one priority. My number one priority in life, Jesus said in Matthew 6:33, **“Seek first the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and He will give you everything you need.”** Everyday, before I get going once I am out of bed and on my feet, I pray and say, “Father God, before I do anything today I want You to help me to love You more and know You in a deeper and more intimate way. I ask that You continue to show me who You are and to have a deeper friendship with You today. It doesn’t matter what goes wrong today or what gets done or doesn’t get done, I must know You a little bit better and love You a little bit more today--then my day will be considered a success.” I make my relationship with Jesus my top priority. Paul says it like this in Philippians 3:8 **“Everything else is worthless compared with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus. I’ve discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I may know Christ.”** Paul says I make my relationship with Jesus Christ my #1 priority. God says to us in Jeremiah 29:13 **“You will find Me when you seek Me with all your heart.”** Ask yourself, what or who did I seek in 2016? How has that worked out for you? Do you feel closer to God? Is your faith stronger? Do you look forward to being in God’s presence more every day? Question: Are you seeking God everyday with all of your heart? If you don’t you will never move into that place where you experience God as your friend. But you can. Start today by making your friendship with God your top priority. You can start by following our Bible bookmark every day. If you will follow this bookmark--or you can do it online--you will read the entire Bible this year in 2017 once and the N.T. twice. Nothing will draw you closer to Jesus Christ then getting to know who He is and what His character is like and the promises He has made to you. Please write this down in your notes: **I’m as close to God as I choose to be.** You cannot blame anyone else for feeling far from God. You can’t blame your

wife, husband, parents or children. If you feel far from God at the beginning of this marvelous year, guess who moved? You simply didn't make your friendship with God your #1 priority, but you can start this New Year off by doing so. How do you know when God is not your best friend? How do you know when your knowledge of who God is becomes sketchy? Jesus said in Matthew chapter 6 that the secret, symbol or leading characteristic of a person who is not growing in their friendship with God is worry. When you worry it means that you don't know and trust God at that moment. You've forgotten who He is or what He said or what He's promised to do in your life. You're acting like an atheist. You're acting like God doesn't exist. You're acting like it all depends on you. You can change that around and beat your worry, fear and anxiety by making knowing God your #1 priority.

II. Slow down and be quiet

More and more, we're hearing the need from the medical and psychological field that, as humans, we were meant to move much slower than what we are as a culture. If you're going to develop and grow a relationship you must slow down and learn to be quiet. Does it surprise you that one of the key elements in developing a relationship with God--so He is truly your best friend--the Bible tells us we have the need to slow down and be quiet in God's presence. Friendship with God is like any other friendship--you have to make time for it. If you don't make time for your human friends, they're not your friends. You make time for your friends. To be friends with the living God, our Creator and Father, you must give Him your best time. Please read with me Psalm 46:10 **"Be still and know that I am God."** To develop an intimate **friendship with God you must have a daily quiet time. This is how you practice daily this verse "Be still and know that I am God."** Many people don't know anything about God. They don't know how God acts. They don't know why He does what He does. And they're not aware of what He is up to on this planet. Why? Because friendship with God is reserved for those who reverence Him by sitting down, slowing down and being quiet and spending time with Him. What would a friend be if you never spent any time with them? Not a friend. God simply becomes your acquaintance if you simply just come to church services. That is a great start. I encourage you to

commit to being here every Sunday to one of our two services and to the four Worship Nights that we will host this year. But that is not enough to have God as your best friend. You must be willing to just be quiet in His presence and be still. Get down, sit down, read God's Word and listen and say, "God what is it that you want to say to me this morning or afternoon or evening." You don't have to use a lot of fancy phrases, just be open, honest, genuine and authentic with God. I like what Jesus says in Matthew 6:5-6 in the Message paraphrase **"When you come before God, don't turn it into a theatrical production. Just find a quiet secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense His grace."** Make knowing God my number one priority and then I must slow down and be quiet in His presence.

III. Decide whose friendship you want most

This is incredibly important, loved friend. You don't have time for everyone to be your friend. And if you choose to have everyone else as your friend, you're not going to have time for God in your life. You must decide who you want most of all to be your best friend. These kinds of people know the baseball and football scores. They know the stock market quotes. They know the top ten songs. They know how to do a recipe. They know who's in and who's out in every soap opera. They know who's up and who's down in the celebrity charts and TMZ. But they don't know God. They have missed the most important person in all of life. How in the world could anyone miss out on fellowship and relationship with God when He says, "This is what I made you for and is what I want with you. I want a deep, intimate relationship with you." How in the world do you miss it? It's real simple. You care about something else more. That's why you're not a friend of God. And you're missing the relationship that you were designed for with your Creator. The Bible says it in very specific ways. James 4:4 says, **"You should know that loving the world is the same as hating God. Anyone who wants to be a friend of the 'world' becomes an enemy of God."** What does it mean when it says loving the world is hating God? How does the Bible define what the world is? 1 John 2:15-17 says it perfectly: **"Do not love this world, nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the**

Father in you. 16 For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure (Hedonism), a craving for everything we see (Materialism), and pride in our achievements and possessions (Humanism). These are not from the Father, but are from this world. 17 And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever.” The word world stands for this culture’s values. They are anti-Christ and anti-God. In Boca Raton, just before Christmas, a school teacher put a satanist pictorial up right next to the nativity. What a great example of this world’s values. God says I want you to love people and to hate the world’s values. In John 15:14 Jesus says, **“You are My friends if you obey Me.”** Jesus says, “If you’re going to be My friends then I want you to value what I value. I value My people. I value lost people. I want that to matter to you.” That means we will learn to love sharing Jesus with people who don’t know Him. Wanting to be friends with Jesus means we learn to love God through worshiping Him with all of our lives. To be a friend with God means we get to know Him through fellowshiping with Him and with other Christians in our local church here at CVCHURCH. To be a friend with Jesus means we love to serve God by serving others. To be a friend of Jesus means we grow in our relationship with Him by reading His Word everyday. By engaging in these daily habits you develop a very strong personal relationship with God.

IV. Nurture an ongoing conversation with God

Attending church every week, becoming a member of a small group, attending our four special worship nights and getting involved in serving in one of our ministries and sharing your faith with the lost are all great endeavors. But in order to nurture an ongoing conversation with God you will want to develop the habit of maintaining and nurturing a constant conversation with God. You get to talk with God all the time about anything, everything, whatever you’re feeling, all day, twenty-four hours a day. You get to have this running conversation with God. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 says, **“Never stop praying.”** I understand this to mean that I am to keep a God consciousness all during the day so that when things come up I immediately talk it over with Him. This is what it means to understand that we’re living in His presence every second of the day. You know how you want to call

your best friend and talk over the things that matter to you most? This is what it means to never stop praying. You live out your day discussing all the things that you think about, reflect on and that you have to deal with. I find the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues one of the most effective ways to stay in touch all day long with the Father by allowing the Holy Spirit to pray through me. I taught on this not too long ago, but Romans 8:26 says, **“And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don’t know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words.”** This Scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit wants to pray through us what the perfect will of God is for our lives and to achieve His purposes and plans throughout the earth. If you would like to experience this gift, I would count it a privilege to pray for you to receive the language He has for you so that you can pray as the Holy Spirit guides you. You get to know God as your best friend as you turn to Him throughout the day through prayer, and you learn to listen to Him as He leads, guides and directs you.

V. Trust God in your pain

Every true friendship is built on trust. The difference between an acquaintance and a friend is this: True friends talk and trust. You talk with acquaintances; but you trust your friends. If you don’t trust someone, they’re not your friends. You may spend eight hours a day with them but if you don’t trust them they’re not a friend. The bedrock of every friendship is trust. This is especially true with your friendship with God. You get to trust Him especially when things don’t make sense, and everything is going sideways, and when you’re going under and you think, “I’m going under for the last time.” Psalm 55:22 says this **“Give your burdens to the Lord, and He will take care of you. He will not permit the godly to slip and fall.”** 1 Peter 5:6-7 says, **“So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time He will lift you up in honor. 7 Give all your worries and cares to God, for He cares about you.”** The word cast means you take your problems, questions, hurt, habits and hang-ups and betrayal and woundedness and you sling them onto God. You do it out of trust because you choose to believe His Word and promise when He says to you, “Cast them on Me because I care for you, and I will take care of you during this

season of your life.” God actually lets you go through pain in order to draw you closer to Him. **Pain is the fuel of passion.** When you’re going through a tough time, have you noticed that all of a sudden your prayers get a whole lot more intense? Have you noticed that? When you’re in deep pain you don’t just go, “Oh, our Father, how art thou today?” No you scream, “Help!” You cry out to God. Pain is the fuel of passion. It energizes us with intensity. God says, “When you do that I will bring you closer to Me.” Here is what I have learned with all of the pain that I go through: The more honest you are with God, the deeper your friendship with Him will be. God can handle your frankness. Your cries. Your complaints. He can handle your accusations. You will only get to a deep friendship with God as you get ruthlessly raw and honest with God about your fears, your faults, your flaws, your friends, and everything else. It doesn’t have to be eloquent or flowery or fancy. God says, “I am waiting on you to be honest with Me.”

Please hear me as we close. The only way 2017 will truly be the YEAR OF HOPE for all of us individually and as our CVCHURCH FAMILY will be that each one of you are going to commit right now to press into your--our--relationship with God and become best friends with God.

COMMUNION

Jesus gave us two symbols that remind us of the barrier that stood before God and us. One of the symbols is water baptism. We will make baptism available the 4th Sunday of each month. If you haven’t been baptized yet since you have surrendered your life to Jesus, it is time to do it. Jesus commands us in Matthew 28:19 that we’re to get baptized, and to baptize those who confess Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Baptism according to Romans 6:4 says that it is through baptism that we identify with Jesus Christ in His death and burial, and just as Christ was raised from the dead, we are raised to new life because of our trust, faith and identity with Him. Galatians 3:27 says when you are united with Christ in baptism you put on Christ, it’s like you’re putting on new clothes. Baptism is incredibly important in demonstrating your identification with Jesus Christ. You now belong to Him. If you haven’t been baptized and you want to be baptized please fill out your CC and put it in the offering today and mark that you want to

be baptized. We will call you and talk you through it so you feel ready to be obedient to Jesus Christ through water baptism.

The 2nd symbol is what we call communion or the Lord's Supper. There are actually four words that describe the same symbol. In the book of Acts it's called "breaking of breads." In 1 Corinthians 10:16 it is called communion. The Greek word used there is koinonia. It's the word for fellowship, which means to have the Lord Jesus in common or communion. In 1 Corinthians 11:20-21 it is called the Lord's Supper. In vs. 24 when Paul writes, "**And when He had given thanks, He broke it and said...**" The word in the Greek for thanks is where we get the word Eucharist. It means to give thanks. What we're about to celebrate can be called Communion, the Lord's Supper, the Lord's Table or the Eucharist. What is important are the two questions that communion answers.

The first question is do I matter to God? Do you matter to God? Does your life have meaning, significance and value? Communion is a reminder that the answer is a resounding yes. You matter so much to God that He sent His only Son Jesus Christ to pay the penalty for our sins and to remove God's wrath from our lives so that we can be forgiven, adopted into His family, and to live out a life of value and meaning as we fulfill His purposes and plans for our lives. Jesus said "No one shows greater love than when he lays down his life for his friends." Jesus died for you because you matter to Him. In 1 Corinthians 11:23-24 Paul writes, "**For I pass on to you what I received from the Lord Himself. On the night when He was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then He broke it in pieces and said, 'This is My body, which is given for you. Do this to remember Me.'**" Before we eat together, we thank God that He wants to be your friend and thank Jesus that He came to earth and He took your place on the cross and thank Him for forgiving you and giving you a new life of love, joy, peace, and hope for eternity.

The 2nd question that communion answers is "Can I be forgiven? Everything that I have done wrong the things that I regret, that I feel bad about, that I feel guilty or shameful about, can I truly have my slate washed clean? Can I become a new person, a new man, a new woman? Can I be forgiven? And the answer to this

question is a resounding yes. Jesus said that He came so that we could be forgiven. Ephesians 2:4-5 says, **“But God is so rich in mercy, and He loves us so much, 5 that even though we were dead because of our sins, He gave us life when He raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God’s grace that you have been saved!)”** Romans 3:25 says, **“For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed His life, shedding His blood.”** In communion we celebrate the fact that Jesus has made us right with the Father through the sacrifice of shedding His blood. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11:25-26 **“In the same way, He took the cup of wine after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant between God and His people--an agreement confirmed with My blood. Do this to remember Me as often as you drink it. 26 For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord’s death until He comes again.’”** Let’s drink the cup together.