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Disciples for Life: Still Sharpening One Another After 30 Years

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STILL SHARPENING ONE ANOTHER AFTER 30 YEARS

A photograph of a computer monitor displaying a Zoom meeting. The screen shows five participants in a grid layout. In the top row, there are two participants: a man with a beard on the left and a man with glasses on the right. In the bottom row, there are three participants: a man with a grey beard on the left, a woman in the center, and a man with glasses on the right. A yellow sticky note is attached to the bottom of the monitor, with handwritten text that reads: "Orlando, Florida, 10/10/2020, 10:00 AM". The monitor is a large, black, curved model. A webcam is mounted on top of the monitor. The background of the room is visible, showing a desk and some papers.

A man with a beard and short, dark hair is shown in profile, looking out a window with horizontal blinds. He is wearing a dark blue polo shirt. On the wooden desk in front of him are two books: one by Michelle Alexander and another by Richard Rothstein. A green ruler and some papers are also on the desk. The scene is lit with soft, natural light from the window.

As iron sharpens iron, so one
man sharpens another.

Proverbs 27:17

years later, I would have laughed harder. My friends 30 years ago were great guys, but it's just difficult to envision three decades from now when you have only lived 19 years. Time brings many changes, but Jesus and my good friends have remained. Cedarville had taught me about both.

Since the early 90s, Mike Heft '93, Derek Gesler '95, Kevin Parliament '93, Tom Mathisen '93, Paul McGrady '93 and I have been friends. It started with the founding of Theta Rho Epsilon, a campus organization, but it has gone much further. We have been at each other's sides for weddings, the birth of children, and new jobs. We have also been there for

If someone would have told me 30 years ago that the men I hung out with then would still be the men I hang out with 30



deaths, disappointments, and even divorce. And the constant throughout each of those moments has been our commitment to Jesus and to one another.

PANDEMIC PRIORITY

The pandemic brought many challenges into people's lives. One great challenge is isolation. Yet, in the midst of this physical isolation, I have not been alone. I have Jesus, that's for sure, but I also have these friends I can count on, even if they are only seen on a computer screen.

A few months into the pandemic, it became obvious that we needed to connect at a deeper level. Yes, we had 30 years of friendship and experiences, but we needed to process the pressures of the pandemic, isolation, and life on a more consistent basis. And to us, there was no better group of people to process them with than each other. So, we began meeting on Friday nights via Zoom to catch up, encourage, and sharpen. It has been the lifeline that I needed.

There is something that cannot be understated about having friends with whom you can be completely vulnerable.

Too often as we grow older, we tend to become more guarded. Some find their identities in the titles in front of their names. Our group of friends have many titles.

Some are lawyers; others are vice presidents, directors, and project managers; and I am a pastor. With each title comes a temptation to live toward others' expectations instead of living out of Jesus' acceptance of us. Having friends who know us deeply helps cut through the fakeness we can be tempted to wrap around ourselves like a coat on a chilly walk around Cedar Lake. This combination of Jesus and friends who know us intimately well makes a significant difference during a pandemic and for the rest of life.

TRUTH AND TRANSPARENCY

Jesus did not design us to walk through this life alone. That is why he gave us the Holy Spirit to be in us and friends to be around us. Throughout the years, Jesus has used both

His Spirit and our friendships to guide, support, heal, and challenge. Sometimes that comes from an encouraging text with Scripture or a Friday-night conversation about theology. Other times, the text or conversation can be confrontational. Yet, the wounds of a friend are always better than the kisses of an enemy (Prov. 27:6).

When I was talking to the guys about this article, they mentioned several of those truths:

"I appreciate the complete transparency we have with each other and how we can do it without being judgmental."

"I value the honesty that I am not able to get everywhere."

"The fact that we know each other's stories makes all the difference. We do life together, even if it is from miles away."

Among all the comments, one truth always came through loud and clear, "We need this."

OAK TREE OF FRIENDSHIP

Might I suggest you need it, too? Yes, we are all busy and yes, the pandemic has caused a lot of additional stress and challenge. But that is why we need it even more. If you still

We planted our oak tree of friendship 30 years ago, and the benefits of it have been invaluable

connect with your college friends, set up a Zoom call or Google Meet and talk about life, Jesus, and the challenges you face. If you have grown close to a new set of friends,

connect with them and do the same. Jesus designed us for community (Eph. 4:15-16), and too many of us are trying to live for Him on our own.

For the six of us, we planted our oak tree of friendship 30 years ago, and the benefits of it have been invaluable. It has brought us closer to Jesus and closer to each other. We have sharpened each other. In the same way, we all need those oak tree-type friendships. And even if you don't have them today, it is OK. You can begin the process now. It is said, "The best time to plant an oak tree is 30 years ago. The second-best time is today."

Brian Bales '93 is Lead Pastor at Christian Fellowship Church in Ashburn, Virginia. He earned his Ed.D. from Southern Seminary.