

Frenemies!

Mike Banta

March 16, 2025 at Elizabeth Presbyterian

Frenemies! What an unusual word! It's obviously a smashing together of the words "friend" and "enemy." (The technical term is portmanteau, but smashing together makes more sense to me.) The word first appeared in print in 1953 ("Howz about calling the Russians our Frenemies?") We all have probably had a relationship that we could apply this term to.

Believe it or not, someone actually went to the trouble of categorizing frenemies. There's the Unfiltered/Undermining type who insults, makes fun of a friend so much that it gets hard to tolerate. The Over-Involved Frenemy is well, overinvolved. You have Competitive work frenemies, Ambivalent frenemies, Jealous frenemies, and Passive-Aggressive frenemies. There are way too many ways to be an underhanded friend, it seems.

Frenemies can be found everywhere, including families and churches. Rabbi David A. Nelson likes to tell the story of two brothers who went to their rabbi to settle a longstanding feud. The rabbi got the two to reconcile their differences and shake hands. As they were about to leave, he asked each one to make a wish for the other in honor of the Jewish New Year. The first brother turned to the other and said, "I wish you what you wish me." At that, the second brother threw up his hands and said, "See, Rabbi, he's starting up again!"

It can go both ways. A friend may prove to be an enemy, but an enemy could be a friend! There is a story of a Baptist pastor during the American Revolution, Peter Miller, who lived in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, and enjoyed the friendship of George Washington. In Ephrata also lived Michael Wittman, an evil-minded sort who did all he could to oppose and humiliate the pastor. One day Michael Wittman was arrested for treason and sentenced to die. Peter Miller traveled seventy miles on foot to Philadelphia to plead for the life of the traitor. "No, Peter," General Washington said. "I cannot grant you the life of your friend." "My friend!" exclaimed the old preacher. "He's the bitterest enemy I have." "What?" cried Washington. "You've walked seventy miles to save the life of an enemy? That puts the matter in a different light. I'll grant your pardon." And he did. Peter Miller took Michael Wittman back home to Ephrata--no longer an enemy but a friend.

What constitutes an enemy? Our passage from Psalms gives David's answer. Obviously, it includes those who attack and make war against you. Those who lie and give false witness about you, and even threaten violence are enemies. In our Luke passage, we have Pharisees coming to warn Jesus about Herod. But wait – I thought the Pharisees were adversaries to Jesus! It turns out that some, even many of them, were secretly friends and followers of Jesus. Think about Nicodemus who came stealthily by night to speak with Him!

Jesus then agonizes over Jerusalem – both a friend and enemy to prophets and teachers. He recognizes His love for them and yet declares that they will be forsaken.

Going back to our Psalms passage (which I consider important enough to include both as Call to Worship and as scripture read!), we find how David defined his friendship with God. God is gracious, his light and salvation. David longs to dwell with his friend God in His temple, His own home. He is doing what God has asked – to seek after Him. He asks to be taught by his Lord. In return, David will wait for the Lord and be courageous.

Paul also talks about frenemies in his letter to the Philippians we heard today. There were many associated with the church that were enemies to the cross of Christ. Look at how Paul describes them: they will end in destruction; they glory in their shame! Rather than focused on Christ, they are entranced by the things of the earth. It could have been fame, riches, who knows what! There is this interesting phrase where Paul says that “their god is their belly.” The word for belly is *koilia*, which can also be translated as appetite. It describes the whole belly, or the lower belly, where excrement goes. It would be like us saying they are driven by their guts.

And so we can begin to figure out what a friend of God may look like, as well as how God's enemies may look. This is the first application of this message to each of our lives. What do we look like? Are we friend or enemy to Christ, or worse, are we an enemy in disguise – in other words, a frenemy!

What are the characteristics of a friend of God? Like David, one desires to be with Christ in every way possible. He or she is teachable by God. As Paul tells us, a friend declares citizenship in heaven, looking to and aligning with our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Other portions of this letter to the Philippians teach us even

more. In the second chapter, we are encouraged to be humble even as Christ is humble. **“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”** Wow! The greatest being of all became the least of all. Surely a friend of God could be humble in our own little way!

Early in the letter we are told to be standing firm together in one spirit, together with each other. We are also taught that we not only believe in Christ but also suffer for Him. And so this brings me to these two women, Euodia and Syntyche. They clearly have worked together with Paul and others for the gospel, suffering alongside them. Some interesting notes, by the way: Clement, who is mentioned here, became one of the early church fathers even into the second century. Then there’s this “true companion.” The Greek word translated here is *syzygos*, meaning yoked together. Now it’s likely that this is actually another person’s name! I was tempted to put it into the reading that way, but I figured that I had given Barb enough tongue twisters without that one! Given that three other personal names are listed in the same sentence (Euodia, Syntyche, Clement) it seems probable that this is another given name.

Can you imagine being these two ladies, who were clearly wonderful pillars of the church in Philippi but remembered in Scripture only for their argument! A little background may be helpful. Philippi was a Roman colony, and in Roman society women had much more freedom to be leaders, movers and shakers so to speak, than they might have in other cultures of the time. These women almost certainly had leadership roles in the church. They are true friends of Christ, listed as having their names in the book of life. Paul is not trying to degrade their position or their passion for Jesus.

We don’t know what the argument was about, but it was substantial enough that Paul needed to address it in writing. This is the kind of thing that happens in every church from time to time, and Paul’s time-honored approach to agree in the Lord makes all the difference. What does it mean to do this? When we disagree, remember who we are, all of us, in Christ. Nothing we may be at

loggerheads about comes close to importance to that. Then, as Paul tells us elsewhere, we submit one to another as to the Lord. Humility is a balm that heals all of this.

I now want to address what may seem like the least humble statement Paul could have made. In the beginning of our passage he told the folks at Philippi to “join in imitating me!” He also gives himself as the model of who else they should walk according to. It’s important to look at the context of this assertion. Just before he said this, he talked about himself as not perfect, but pressing on into Christ. This is Paul’s definition of maturity.

So are we friends or enemies – to others, but first to God? Think about it this way – are you ready to say with Paul that it is ok to imitate your faith? To do so is not as far-fetched as it may sound. Keep our eyes on the prize – which is the call of God on us as citizens of His Kingdom. Know that you are not perfect, but you are letting yourself be led into something greater. It doesn’t matter how mature we are in our faith; we will always have room for more growth. If we do that, then yes, let others imitate us.

David was not perfect, yet he was bold enough to seek residence with God in His house. He was confident enough to know that God would hide him from trouble, and would lift him up. What did David say? “my heart says to you, ‘Your face, Lord, do I seek.’” He too, in his own way, was pressing on in the race set before him. He is yet another great model to follow.

And finally, on to our enemies here on earth. They may be outright foes or could be hidden behind a false or surface friendship. Jesus made very clear to us that we should love them as well. Give them more than they take from you! We’ve heard many stories, even like Marilyn shared with us a few weeks ago. Her kindness to the schoolmate who was harassing and shaming her bore great fruit. At the very least it will shame your enemy and make them rethink their point of view.

The Congo in 2007 was embroiled in rebellion, with competing militias and armies. One man, we will call him Samuel, had his entire family – parents, wife and children – massacred by Hutu militia. Samuel escaped and walked for four days to reach a refugee camp. While there, he planted a church to spread the

gospel in that place. Two years later, he was walking through the camp and recognized a new arrival. It was the militia commander who had killed his family.

Samuel introduced himself and invited the man to his house for a meal. He then invited him to stay at his house for the night. The man stayed in his house for three years. Through Samuel's life, the man saw the gospel and experienced the reality of forgiveness. And after three years, he became a Christian.

Today Samuel and his former enemy serve Jesus together as pastors of the church Samuel planted. Samuel says, "By God's grace, I welcomed him to my house. Follow Jesus. Be peacemakers. Walk with your enemies, pray for them, and follow Jesus!"

I don't know if I have enough grace in me to do as Samuel did if I were faced with such a decision. I can only pray that I could at least forgive such an enemy – for my own sake, if nothing else. Unresolved anger sucks our lifeblood from us. Samuel was clearly at a maturity level much like Paul described. He continued to run his race in following Jesus.

We all have enemies, and we all have frenemies. Treating them in the way Christ has instructs us will not be easy. But it will be the right thing to do. Loving and praying for such people is living as Jesus, conforming ourselves closer to Him. Who knows, there may be a time when we can drop the "enemy" portion out of frenemies and see them become true friends.

Look to Christ. Be His friend first. And then put everything else into context under that friendship. It's ok to sometimes submit one to another when conflict arises. At the least, recognize who your adversary is in Christ's eyes. Not everyone will react positively to your kindness and caring in the face of anger, but at the least you will be free of the inner consequences of the relationship. And many will turn to become treasured companions in your joint walk with Jesus.

Amen.