

Cicero's On Friendship

A faithful abridged modernization + 2026 commentary (based on Marcus Tullius Cicero, 44 BCE)

"You might as well remove the sun from the sky as remove friendship from life."

- Laelius, modernized from Chapter 13

Important note: Cicero wrote *On Friendship* as a dialogue, not a handbook. He presents a remembered conversation in 129 BCE, a few days after the sudden death of Scipio Aemilianus. Scipio's closest friend, Gaius Laelius, speaks with his sons-in-law, Gaius Fannius and Quintus Mucius Scaevola.

About this version: The public-domain English source has twenty-seven chapters and many long Roman examples. This rewrite follows those chapters in order, preserves the dialogue's main turns and its important examples, and shortens repetition and name lists. It is an abridged modernization, not a line-by-line translation. All short quoted lines below are modernized unless identified otherwise.

Why read this?

- Because modern life gives us more contacts, followers, and group chats than any earlier generation, while dependable adult friendship can still be hard to build and maintain.
- Because friendship easily mixes with access, status, entertainment, reassurance, and networking. Cicero asks whether usefulness can support love without becoming its hidden price.
- Because loyalty becomes morally difficult when a friend is wrong. Cicero rejects both blind obedience and the habit of treating people as instantly disposable.

1) Cicero brings a remembered conversation to the stage

Cicero begins by addressing his own close friend, Atticus. He remembers the years when he followed the older statesman and augur Scaevola, listening carefully to his stories and storing away his sayings.

One story stayed with him. Rome had watched Publius Sulpicius and Quintus Pompeius turn from intimate friends into bitter political enemies. Their collapse made friendship a public question, not merely a private one.

Scaevola then recalled a conversation held many years earlier. A few days after Scipio Aemilianus died, Scaevola and Fannius visited their father-in-law, Laelius. The friendship of Laelius and Scipio was already famous, so the two younger men asked Laelius to explain what friendship really is and what it requires.

Cicero says he has arranged the remembered discussion as a dialogue so the speakers can appear before us. He asks Atticus - and the reader - to forget Cicero for a while and imagine Laelius speaking.

The frame places two damaged friendships side by side: one destroyed by political conflict and another interrupted by death. Cicero does not begin with a tidy definition. He begins with what friendship looks like when history tests it.

Core idea:

- The work begins with friendship under pressure: betrayal in public life and grief in private life.
- Cicero uses remembered voices so the philosophy feels lived rather than delivered as a lecture.

Modern mirror (2026):

- Friendship advice now often arrives as lists, rules, and short videos. Cicero builds his argument from a death, a political rupture, and a real relationship with a history.
- Public conflict can still turn former closeness into evidence, gossip, or ammunition, especially when politics and social media overlap.
- The dialogue form keeps more than one human perspective in the room, even though Laelius gives the longest answer.

2) Laelius grieves without pretending to be untouched

Fannius tells Laelius that Rome is watching him. People call him wise and want to know how a wise person bears the death of his closest friend. Laelius recently missed a meeting of the augurs, and some assumed grief had driven him away from duty.

Scaevola corrects the story: Laelius was absent because he was ill. Laelius agrees. Personal loss, he says, should not become an excuse for abandoning every responsibility.

But he refuses to perform emotional invulnerability. "If I said I did not miss Scipio, I would be lying." A person of Laelius's gentle character could not lose such a friend and feel nothing. Wisdom is not numbness.

His consolation is that the loss belongs mainly to the survivor. Scipio lived courageously, served Rome, cared for his family, and died at the height of public respect. Laelius believes the soul survives death and that Scipio has gone somewhere better. Yet he also considers the opposite possibility: if death ends awareness, then Scipio cannot be suffering. On either account, Scipio has not been harmed in the way Laelius has.

That thought can sound severe, but Laelius uses it to resist making grief entirely about himself. He wants sorrow to include gratitude: Scipio existed; they found one another; they shared public and private business, life in Rome, service abroad, tastes, pursuits, and beliefs.

The friendship therefore has not become nothing. Memory carries Scipio's character forward. Laelius can still call his own life fortunate because he lived it beside such a person.

Core idea:

- Grief is not failed wisdom; Laelius openly admits that Scipio's death hurts him.
- Memory allows a friendship to keep shaping a life after one friend is gone.

Modern mirror (2026):

- Photos, voice notes, message histories, and shared playlists give memory a physical form that Cicero could not have imagined.
- Memorialized profiles and automated "On this day" reminders can comfort a survivor or reopen grief without warning.
- Modern culture often praises emotional control, but Laelius's standard is steadiness with feeling, not the absence of feeling.

3) The friendship Laelius means is demanding, but not perfect

When Fannius asks for a formal theory, Laelius hesitates. Professional philosophers, he jokes, are trained to give polished speeches on demand. He can offer something more practical.

His first claim is deliberately demanding: the fullest friendship can exist only between good people. He immediately refuses to make "good" mean a flawless sage whom no one has ever met.

By good people, he means those whose lives show recognizable honesty, fairness, generosity, self-control, and courage. They can make mistakes. What matters is that greed, cruelty, and deception do not govern their character.

Nature connects all human beings, Laelius says, but affection grows more concentrated as people come closer. Friendship gathers that broad human bond into a very small circle. It differs from family because kinship can remain in name after affection disappears; friendship cannot.

Laelius defines friendship as complete agreement about human and divine things, joined with mutual goodwill and affection. Cicero's phrase is much stronger than shared tastes or ordinary compatibility. He expects deep harmony in moral, religious, and civic aims, though he does not explain how much disagreement on lesser matters that harmony can contain.

From that bond come friendship's great gifts. Joy becomes fuller when it is shared. Misfortune becomes lighter when someone helps carry it. A friend is a person to whom we can speak almost as openly as we speak inside our own minds - "another self" who gives courage and hope.

The bond also reaches beyond private comfort. Homes and states depend on concord, Laelius says, and even strong communities can be destroyed by hostility and faction.

Laelius remembers a play in which Pylades claims to be Orestes so he can die in his friend's place, while Orestes insists on telling the truth and accepting the danger himself. The whole theatre rises to applaud. Even people unsure that they could make such a sacrifice recognize what loyalty at its highest looks like.

Core idea:

- Serious friendship joins affection to a shared direction in character and life.
- A friend becomes "another self": someone whose joy, danger, and future matter almost as one's own.

Modern mirror (2026):

- A follower count measures reach, not mutual knowledge, trust, or the willingness to carry inconvenience.
- Online friendship can be fully real when both people know one another, choose one another, and show up over time.
- Parasocial and AI relationships may feel intimate while remaining unequal in knowledge, vulnerability, and responsibility.

4) Love comes first; usefulness follows

Laelius now asks the question at the centre of the essay. Do people seek friends because they are weak and need an exchange of services, or does friendship begin in something deeper?

He does not deny usefulness. Friends give advice, protection, introductions, money, shelter, encouragement, and practical help. His point is about order: those benefits are not the first cause of affection.

The Latin word *amicitia* is connected with *amor*, love. For Laelius, friendship begins when we are drawn toward what looks like goodness in another person. We can admire the integrity of people we never met and even respect honour in an enemy. When such admiration arises toward someone close enough to know, it can become affection.

Laelius and Scipio did not choose each other from helplessness. Neither needed to extract status or rescue from the other. They admired one another's character; time, goodwill, and shared action deepened the bond. Many advantages followed, but advantage did not create it.

If usefulness were the root, any change in usefulness would end the friendship. Illness, poverty, lost influence, exhaustion, or age would make a person replaceable. Laelius thinks genuine affection works in the opposite direction: the friend matters even when fortune strips away the benefits around him.

Generosity is therefore not an investment. Friends may delight in helping each other, but they do not keep a private calculation of the return. Usefulness is the fruit of friendship, not its hidden price.

Core idea:

- Need and practical help belong to friendship, but they do not explain why the person is loved.
- The friend is not a resource whose value expires when circumstances change.

Modern mirror (2026):

- Networking is honest when people admit they are exchanging information, access, or opportunity; friendship asks for value beyond the exchange.
- "Clout friendships" often disappear when influence, visibility, or proximity to power disappears.
- Healthy interdependence allows people to need one another without making one relationship carry every emotional and practical need.

5) Even real friendships can be broken by life

Scipio used to say that one of the hardest achievements is keeping a friendship unbroken until death.

Cicero has praised friendship almost as an eternal natural bond; now he turns toward everything that can destroy it.

Childhood friends grow into different people. Two friends may want the same love, honour, office, reputation, or scarce opportunity. Character may change through misfortune or age. Money and political power can turn people who once trusted one another into rivals.

The danger is not only circumstance. Character itself changes. A person who was once open and generous may become consumed by ambition, resentment, fear, or power. Friendship cannot freeze either person at the moment when they first became close.

This creates a tension in Laelius's argument. He wants genuine friendship to be permanent because its foundation is character, yet he admits that character and purpose are not always permanent. A friendship can begin sincerely and still become impossible to continue in the same form.

The hardest test arrives when a friend asks for something dishonourable and treats refusal as betrayal. At that point the desire to preserve the relationship collides with the reason the friendship was worth having.

Core idea:

- Affection alone cannot protect a friendship from rivalry, ambition, changed character, or moral conflict.
- Cicero distinguishes ideal friendship from ordinary friendships, which can fail when character and purpose change.

Modern mirror (2026):

- Adult friendships often strain under relocation, work schedules, parenting, caregiving, illness, money, and political division.
- Digital contact can keep a bond alive, but constant visibility can also make envy, comparison, and conflict harder to escape.
- The end of a friendship does not automatically prove that every earlier year was false.

6) Loyalty does not excuse wrongdoing

Laelius gives friendship a firm moral boundary: never ask a friend to do what is wrong, and never do wrong because a friend asks.

His sharpest example is political. Gaius Blossius had been fiercely loyal to Tiberius Gracchus. When questioned after Gracchus's violent downfall, Blossius said that he had obeyed because he valued Gracchus above everything.

Laelius pressed him: "Suppose Gracchus had ordered you to set fire to the Capitol?" Blossius first answered that Gracchus would never have made such a demand. When Laelius repeated the hypothetical order, Blossius admitted that he would have obeyed.

Laelius treats this not as heroic devotion but as the surrender of conscience. Friendship began because one person appeared worthy of love. It cannot then require the abandonment of the very moral character that made the friendship possible.

Cicero is writing from one side of a bitter Roman political struggle, and his account of the Gracchi is not neutral history. Still, the principle reaches beyond that conflict: "I did it for my friend" does not erase responsibility. Refusing to become an accomplice may protect a friend's deeper good better than obedience does.

Laelius is especially concerned with conspiracy and violence against the Republic. He holds followers responsible alongside leaders when friendship becomes the excuse for attacking the wider community.

Friends should stand beside each other in trouble, Laelius says, but they should not turn loyalty into a private exemption from justice.

Core idea:

- Friendship creates no duty to commit, excuse, or conceal wrongdoing.
- Refusal can be an act of loyalty when obedience would damage a friend's character and other people.

Modern mirror (2026):

- Political tribes, workplaces, organizations, and group chats can turn loyalty into pressure to repeat a story, hide evidence, or attack a critic.
- Online accusations often demand instant total defence or instant public abandonment before facts are clear.
- Accountability may include checking the facts, confronting privately, refusing excuses, and accepting that real consequences can follow.

7) Friendship is worth the emotional risk - but power makes it harder

Laelius first says that friends should help willingly, sometimes before being asked, and should offer candid advice when danger is approaching. Care should be ready to take practical form.

Some philosophers advised keeping friendship loose. One person's own troubles are already enough, they argued; close friends make us carry several lives at once. Freedom from worry seems easier if no one gets too near.

Laelius rejects this protected life. "You might as well remove the sun from the sky as remove friendship from life." A person who tears out every feeling that can cause pain does not become wise. He becomes less fully human.

Virtue, Laelius says, is not hard and unbending like iron. It expands when a friend prospers and contracts when a friend suffers. The pain friendship brings is connected to the same sensitivity that lets another person's happiness enlarge our own.

Office, reputation, buildings, and other possessions may serve us, but they cannot return affection. Friendship is different because a living person can answer goodwill with goodwill.

Yet power makes sincerity difficult to recognize. A tyrant may be surrounded by people who smile, praise, and obey, but fear cannot create friendship. The ruler cannot know who loves him and who merely loves safety or reward.

Laelius points to the exiled king Tarquin, who said that only after losing power did he discover which companions had been true and which had been false. Wealth, fame, and influence can produce the same smaller court around an ordinary person.

Core idea:

- Avoiding every emotional burden would also remove much of love, courage, and shared joy.
- Power attracts imitation friendship and makes honest affection harder to distinguish from self-interest.

Modern mirror (2026):

- "Protecting your peace" can name a healthy limit, but it can also become a polished ideal of relationships that never inconvenience us.
- Status brings invitations, praise, and agreement; it does not reveal who will remain when the rewards disappear.
- People with influence especially need friends who can disappoint them with the truth instead of becoming an audience of agreeable faces.

8) Friendship is not an exact account

Laelius examines three neat rules for limiting what friends owe one another. The first says to love a friend exactly as much as oneself. The second says to give exactly as much affection and service as the other person gives. The third says to value a friend only as highly as the friend values himself.

He rejects all three. We sometimes do for friends what we would not do for ourselves. An exact balance reduces generosity to a debtor-and-creditor account. And when a friend has lost confidence, copying that low opinion is not loyalty; a friend should help raise the person's hopes.

Laelius also rejects the cynical maxim, "Love your friend while remembering that you may one day hate him." A person who enters intimacy while collecting material for a future case is not fully trusting. Cicero's better rule is to judge carefully before loving deeply.

Then Cicero complicates his earlier absolute boundary. If a friend's life or reputation is in danger, Laelius allows some limited departure from the perfectly straight path, provided it causes no extreme disgrace. The two rules leave a tension that Cicero does not fully resolve.

Core idea:

- Friendship needs reciprocity, but not a perfectly balanced exchange of messages, favours, money, or time.
- A limited concession may be allowed when a friend's life or reputation is at stake, but never at the price of extreme disgrace.

Modern mirror (2026):

- Counting invitations, reply times, payments, and emotional labour can reveal a pattern, but changing health and responsibilities mean reciprocity is often better judged across time.
- Boundaries protect care when demands become controlling; they should not erase every responsibility that intimacy creates.
- Equal dignity does not require equal output during illness, caregiving, unemployment, parenting, or crisis.

9) Choose slowly, then trust deeply

Scipio complained that people could tell exactly how many sheep and goats they owned but could not say how many genuine friends they had. They inspected property carefully and chose intimate companions almost at random.

The difficulty is that affection often arrives before judgment. We can only learn a person's character through some form of relationship, but once we are deeply attached, judgment becomes harder.

Laelius advises us to rein in the first rush of affection as a driver reins in a horse. This does not mean setting traps. It means letting trust grow at the speed of evidence.

Character appears in small money matters and large ones, in competition for office or advancement, in prosperity, and in disaster. Some people are friendly while they need support and contemptuous once they rise. Others enjoy a friend's success but disappear when association becomes costly.

The qualities Laelius looks for are firmness, stability, constancy, straightforwardness, sympathy, and warmth. A complicated and deceptive character may be charming, but it cannot provide the predictability on which trust depends.

Loyalty also resists suspicion. A trustworthy friend does not enjoy making accusations, readily believe every charge, or invent reasons to doubt a person who has earned confidence.

Cicero does not ask us to turn suspicion into a personality. He asks for a better sequence: notice, know, judge, and then allow love to deepen.

Core idea:

- Attraction opens the door; conduct across time establishes whether trust is safe.
- The best test is not manufactured drama but how a person behaves when loyalty becomes inconvenient.

Modern mirror (2026):

- Apps and platforms can match interests, identities, and tastes; they cannot certify steadiness, discretion, or courage.
- Fast intimacy and immediate oversharing can create obligations before either person has learned what the other can carry.
- Shared humour, politics, fandom, or chemistry may begin a bond without proving the character needed to sustain it.

10) Time, inequality, and distance change the shape of friendship

New friendship deserves welcome and carries the hope of future fruit. Still, old friendship, Laelius says, is like aged wine. Novelty should not make us discard a person whose loyalty has been tested by years.

Time alone is not enough. Childhood companions may grow into incompatible adults. Shared history deserves respect, but mature friendship still needs some agreement of character and direction.

Friends are also rarely equal in wealth, age, rank, ability, or public influence. Scipio stood above several friends in status, yet Laelius remembers that he did not act superior. He used his advantages to help them and met them on a level of equal human dignity.

The more powerful friend should come down without patronizing or controlling. The friend who receives help should remember it; the giver should not keep announcing it. Help should fit both the giver's actual ability and the receiver's capacity to use or carry it.

The less powerful friend has duties too. Constant resentment and repeated reminders of past services can turn affection into an account that never closes. Cicero asks both sides to prevent unequal fortune from becoming permanent superiority or permanent grievance.

Finally, affection should not block a friend's serious work or duty. Separation may hurt, but asking someone to abandon an honourable purpose merely to remain nearby turns love into possession.

Core idea:

- Old friendship gains depth from tested history, but history cannot replace present character.
- Unequal resources need not destroy friendship when both people retain dignity, voice, and freedom.

Modern mirror (2026):

- Money quietly decides restaurants, travel, neighbourhoods, and which social plans are realistically open to everyone.
- Career status and public influence can decide whose schedule, ambitions, and problems dominate a friendship; equal dignity requires a real voice and freedom to refuse.
- Work, children, disability, caregiving, relocation, and exhaustion may require a friendship to change form without requiring affection to disappear.

11) Some friendships should be loosened, not turned into war

Laelius is realistic about endings. A person's character may deteriorate. Purposes may separate. Conduct may become shameful, or a new duty may make the old form of closeness impossible.

When safety and conscience allow, Cato advised letting a friendship become "unstitched rather than torn apart." Gradual distance can preserve the truth that something good once existed, even when intimacy can no longer continue.

Violent or outrageous conduct is different and may require an immediate breach. Cicero's preference for a gradual loosening applies only when conscience and circumstances allow it.

What he strongly rejects is converting past intimacy into public warfare. Scipio ended some friendships over personal and political differences, but Laelius remembers that he avoided humiliation and vindictive language. Former intimacy should not automatically become hatred or public quarrel.

Laelius then turns the demand inward. Most people want a friend who is loyal, patient, candid, generous, and steady, while making little effort to become such a person. The first preparation for friendship is character.

Respect, Laelius says, is friendship's brightest jewel. Friendship should help virtue grow; it must never become virtue's partner in guilt.

Even the person who claims to want complete isolation eventually seeks someone before whom he can pour out his thoughts. Laelius recalls Archytas's image: if a person could rise into the heavens and see the beauty of the universe, the experience would lose much of its pleasure if there were no one with whom to share it.

Core idea:

- When possible, an ending should preserve dignity instead of rewriting the entire friendship as a fraud.
- The search for a good friend begins with the harder task of becoming one.

Modern mirror (2026):

- Adult drift is often caused by distance, exhaustion, family duties, or changed capacity rather than one dramatic betrayal.
- Ghosting and public exposure can turn an ending into confusion or performance; using a former friend's private vulnerability as a weapon corrupts what both people shared.
- Low-contact friendship can remain loving, but repeated absence changes what the relationship can realistically promise.

12) A real friend must be able to tell the truth

Friendship cannot avoid every misunderstanding, but one difficulty must be faced directly: a friend may need correction.

Laelius calls frank advice a duty. It should be offered freely but without bitterness, insult, or the pleasure of feeling superior. The person receiving it also has a duty: to listen without treating every unwelcome fact as an attack.

Terence had captured the problem in comedy: agreement wins popularity, while plain speaking produces resentment. That makes silence tempting. Yet a person who supports every desire and excuses every fault may help a friend move steadily toward ruin.

Cato's warning is sharper still: bitter enemies sometimes tell us truths that agreeable friends are afraid to say.

Flattery is counterfeit friendship because it studies what we want to hear and returns it as praise. Cicero's comic flatterer Gnatho changes every answer to suit his patron. A subtler flatterer pretends to disagree, offers a weak objection, and then surrenders so the other person can enjoy feeling especially wise.

The trick works because people often flatter themselves first. We want our excuses accepted, our judgment confirmed, and our importance enlarged. When one person refuses to hear truth and the other agrees to lie, affection becomes performance.

Warmth is not the problem. Friends should encourage and celebrate one another. Flattery begins when approval becomes more important than the person's actual good. Without an "open breast," as the old translation puts it, neither person can know whether the other's words or affection are sincere.

Core idea:

- Honest correction belongs to friendship when truth is guided by care rather than aggression.
- Flattery offers pleasant agreement while quietly removing the trust that makes friendship real.

Modern mirror (2026):

- "Brutal honesty" often protects the speaker's brutality; useful criticism is specific, proportionate, and usually private.
- Feeds, fandoms, group chats, and recommendation systems can surround a person with confirming voices and make disagreement feel like betrayal.
- AI companions and assistants optimized to please can reproduce Cicero's flatterer unless they are designed to resist empty agreement.

13) Cicero ends where he began: virtue, memory, and Scipio

Laelius closes by repeating the word at the centre of his argument: virtue. Character creates friendship because goodness recognizes and is drawn toward goodness in another person. Character preserves it through loyalty, sincerity, steadiness, and shared purpose.

Love, in this account, is attachment without the pressure of need or the calculation of advantage. Benefits still blossom naturally around friendship. They simply are not the reason the friend is loved.

Friendship is not limited to people of the same age. Laelius cherished older companions, friends of his own generation, and younger people such as Fannius and Scaevola. As one generation gives way to another, life keeps offering new people to love and new chances to be loved.

Then Laelius returns fully to Scipio. "He still lives for me and always will." What Laelius loved was Scipio's character, and that has not died. It remains available as an example to everyone who remembers him.

Laelius recalls not only public greatness but the texture of their days: counsel in public and private affairs, one house and one table, military service, travel, country visits, study, and long hours spent learning beyond the public gaze. He cannot remember offending Scipio or hearing from him a word he wished had not been spoken.

Memory has not replaced the friendship; it has gathered its meaning. Of everything fortune or nature gave him, Laelius ranks his friendship with Scipio highest.

His final advice is simple and severe: settle this firmly in your minds. Virtue comes first, because without it friendship cannot endure. After virtue - and after virtue alone - nothing in human life is greater than friendship.

Core idea:

- Virtue creates and preserves friendship; friendship joins two people in the shared pursuit of what is good.
- Laelius's final proof is not a rule but the remembered life he shared with Scipio.

Modern mirror (2026):

- A close friend can survive in memory as an inner voice: a standard, warning, joke, or way of seeing that continues to shape decisions.
- Intergenerational friendship resists the idea that every meaningful bond must come from the same age, career stage, or social world.
- The strongest legacy of friendship may be the person each friend helped the other become, not the visible record of the relationship.

Quick shortcuts (if you do not want to read everything)

If you have about 25 minutes, read these sections:

- 2) Laelius grieves without pretending to be untouched
- 3) The friendship Laelius means is demanding, but not perfect
- 4) Love comes first; usefulness follows
- 6) Loyalty does not excuse wrongdoing
- 8) Friendship is not an exact account
- 12) A real friend must be able to tell the truth
- 13) Cicero ends where he began

Glossary (plain meanings of Cicero's key words)

Amicitia: The Latin word for friendship. Cicero connects it with *amor*, love, to argue that affection comes before calculated benefit.

Virtue: Dependable moral character in ordinary life: honesty, fairness, generosity, self-control, courage, and steadiness. Cicero does not require impossible perfection.

Goodwill: Actively wanting another person's good, not merely enjoying the person's company or usefulness.

Agreement: A shared moral direction in "human and divine things," not identical opinions about every subject.

Usefulness: The help, access, protection, advice, pleasure, or other benefit that friendship provides. Cicero calls it a result of friendship rather than its origin.

Constancy: Steadiness across success, difficulty, distance, competition, and time.

Another self: Cicero's image for a friend whose welfare begins to matter almost as one's own.

Flattery: Agreement or praise offered to please and gain favour rather than to tell the truth.

Sources (original and public-domain texts)

This modernization follows the movement of Chapters 1-27 in:

- Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Treatises on Friendship and Old Age*, translated by E. S. Shuckburgh, Project Gutenberg eBook #2808: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2808/2808-h/2808-h.htm>
- Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Laelius on Friendship*, Latin and public-domain English texts in the Perseus/Scaife Viewer: <https://scaife.perseus.org/reader/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0474.phi052.perseus-eng2:1/>

The dialogue was written in 44 BCE and is set in 129 BCE. This document is a new abridged paraphrase for accessible reading and discussion; it should not be quoted as a scholarly translation.