

Section 3: God's Good Safeguards For Marriage

Lesson 7: Marital Safeguards (Part Two): Maintaining Warm Friendship

Introduction

"Do not forsake your friend..." (Proverbs 27:10)

Friendship is a word that everyone understands but no one really knows quite how to define. It is a word of which the definition seems both immediately obvious and yet mysteriously elusive. This is because the term "*friend*" can refer to an enormous spectrum of relational depth. At its most basic, "*friend*" means any person with whom you share a mutual affection. But that could mean the person you met yesterday on the bus, or the person with whom you have shared life since childhood. Both of those people might rightly fall under the title "*friend*". This is why people have a strong tendency to place various adjectives before the word friend. We say things like, "*my best friend*," "*my very dear friend*," or "*my closest friend*" *etc.* We add these words in order to clarify the degree of bonding that is associated with that particular friendship because, while we have many friends in life, not every friend falls into the same category. All friendships are important, but some friendships are of far greater depth and far greater worth than others.

So which friendship in life do you think should take the place of highest priority? If God has blessed you with the gift of marriage, then your deepest, most precious, and most important friendship of all is the one you share with your spouse. In one manner of speaking, marriage is simply a word we use to describe the sweetest, most intimate, and most committed form of friendship. Marriage is a covenantal bond between one man and one woman in which they have promised to be a true friend to one another "*for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do we part.*" And yet, despite the fact that marriage is the highest and most precious form of friendship, it often becomes the friendship that we most frequently take for granted. The busyness of life seems to unleash a never-ending barrage of assaults against the bond of friendship between a husband and wife. There is always *something* or *someone* pulling our energies away from the other, straining the tie that binds us, and dividing our attention. Add to this maelstrom the sad reality that our own selfishness often wounds our marital friendship. In one way or another, we get so absorbed in our own desires and interests that we stop consciously cherishing the blessed gift God has given to us in our spouse. The result is that, just like the fire in a wood stove on a cold winter night, if it is left unattended long enough, the once roaring blaze will soon turn into a cold pile of ash.

This is why the special friendship that exists between a husband and wife must be kept warm at all times through continual investment, and care. What is true of "*quarreling*" is also true of friendship, "*For lack of wood the fire goes out...*" (*Prov. 26:20*). We must not expect that just because the fire of our friendship was roaring at the start of our marriage, that this means it will continue to burn brightly through the years without being tended. No. Fresh logs must be cut, split, and carefully placed upon the fire regularly, or the sweetness, strength, and warmth of our friendship will wane. But what does it look like to nurture our friendship as husband and wife? How do we continue to both cultivate and defend the blessing of marital friendship in the midst of all the challenges of life? Our goal today is to seek biblical answers to those important questions.

Biblically Speaking, What Is Friendship For?

The Bible has a lot to say about this question in general. But every single bit of it has important applications to the specific *friendship* that forms the foundation of a healthy, lasting, and God-honoring marriage. Let's begin by observing four aspects of friendship from Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. If it isn't immediately obvious as to why we are considering this passage, let me briefly point out that the word translated "*fellow*" in v10 is the Hebrew word for "*friend*". Thus, the context of this cluster of verses is centered on the benefits gained through healthy friendship. We will take the passage verse by verse:

1. Friends multiply one another's efforts. (Ecc. 4:9)

“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.”

It is not rocket science. When two people are pulling together in the same direction, their strength is doubled, and their potential for successfully accomplishing their goal becomes all the more likely. But this also means that when two people are not in sync—that is, when they are each pulling in their own direction—their strength is cut in half, and their likelihood of success is greatly diminished. The lesson is simple: “Two” people, working in unity as friends, “are better than one.” But what does this look like in marriage?

For starters, it means that a husband and wife have to identify shared goals and the steps that are necessary to reach them. Then, they need to work together toward those ends in a unified way that multiplies one another's efforts. Many marriages slip into a sort of aimless meandering in which neither the husband nor the wife really knows where the family unit is headed, or what its priorities are. Instead, they are just ‘making it through the day.’ We can all be sympathetic to that situation. Life gets busy and can be very overwhelming at times. But we also need to recognize that without a clear and shared vision, neither the husband nor the wife knows *how* or *when* to pick up the rope and pull. Sometimes one is pulling but not the other, and vice versa. Both people end up feeling worn out and frustrated. Worse still is when the husband and wife end up inadvertently pulling in opposing directions and are at odds with each other's efforts. Whenever something of this sort is happening, it is clear that a breakdown in the friendship has occurred. Instead of being two friends working in unity toward the same ends, you have become two individuals trying to carry the load alone. That is not how God designed the marital friendship to flourish.

Q: *When is the last time you and your spouse sat down to identify and articulate Christ-centered priorities and goals for your family so that you both know what you are aiming at and what it will take to reach those goals together?*

Q: *Second, do you have the right goals and priorities in your family, or have the goals been determined by worldly pressures and/or worldly desires?*

2. Friends lift one another up when they fall. (Ecc. 4:10)

“For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!”

The image of this verse is so elementary that it is easy to rush past. But let's take a moment to imagine the scene. Here is a person who has “fallen”—presumably into a pit of some sort. The term “fall” is intentionally vague because it is meant to convey a wide spectrum of various trials that we might face in life: *sin, sickness, depression, injury, loss, hardship, etc.* However, regardless of what the specific nature of the “fall” is, the point being made is that this person is in a very difficult and vulnerable place. They have fallen into a hole that is too deep for them to escape on their own. They need help. *So what will become of them?* The answer given is that *it depends*. It depends on whether or not they have a friend by their side. If they have a true friend with them, then the “one will lift up his fellow” and all will soon be well again. But if this person is “alone when he falls” his situation will be much more severe because he “has not another to lift him up.”

The broadest application of this verse is meant to teach us about the dangers of being a loner, and the need for all of us to pursue meaningful friendships with others lest we be swallowed up by the trials of life. That applies to people who are young, old, single, married, etc. But should it not be the case that the greatest fulfillment of the principles given in this verse should be fulfilled by husbands toward their wives and wives toward their husbands? Sadly, however, selfishness often creeps into the marriage relationship so severely that rather than having compassion when our spouse “falls” into some difficulty, we feel annoyance, frustration, even anger. Rather than extending our hand to “lift them up” we furrow our brow to scold them, or even raise our voice to express our frustration and disappointment. The result is that the one to whom we have pledged our love is now facing a *double-sorrow*. Not only have they “fallen” into some difficult life situation, but they are now being made to feel like an unwanted burden by the friend who should be the first person to extend a hand of help and compassion.

One of the best ways to guard our hearts from allowing this sort of selfishness to harm our marital friendship is by remembering just how many holes we have fallen into ourselves. When we sense a lack of compassion for our spouse we need to remember just how many times we have been the one who was weak and in need of help, and indeed, to recognize that if our Lord should tarry, there will surely be many more times of weakness ahead in which the strength and compassion of our best friend—that is, our spouse—will be the difference-maker as to whether we get “*lifted up*” out of that struggle or *swallowed up* by it. Just as the Lord Jesus Christ has stooped low to “*lift us up*” by his grace and strength, so we must be quick to offer our patience, compassion, understanding, and help to the spouse to whom we have pledged our love in marriage.

Q: *When your spouse “falls”—that is, goes through some difficulty or struggle—how should you respond?*

3. Friends provide comfort in a harsh world. (Ecc. 4:11)

“¹Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone?”

A true friend is not only a source of *restoration* as we saw above (v10), but also a source of *comfort*. That is to say, it is much easier to endure the *cold* nights of life in a fallen world when you have the “*warmth*” of a dear friend by your side. That warmth can be expressed in 10,000 ways: *Gentle words, gestures of kindness, acts of love and personal sacrifice, etc.* These things not only sweeten the marital friendship, but they also make that friendship a catalyst of tremendous comfort for the heart that gives strength and endurance to the soul. But the image given in this verse only works if the two people remain close enough to one another for the warmth of their bodies to be shared. If distance is allowed to grow between them—that is, if the intimacy of their friendship is *not protected*—the cold air will quickly rush in to fill the void and the comforting-warmth once enjoyed will soon fade.

So what will preserve this closeness and warmth in the life of a marriage? What will continue to add logs to the fire so that its heat does not fade? Many things could be listed. But I will focus on two: *time* and *tenderness*.

1. Time

If we take the picture of this verse to its logical conclusion, we recognize that in order for body heat to be shared, two people must actually *be together*—that is, they have to spend quality time near enough to one another for the warmth of their intimacy to multiply. This is something many marriages tend to take for granted until both the husband and wife are shivering. But how can that be avoided? Many people have used the model of setting up a designated “date night” to guard against this drift. That can certainly be helpful and if it works for your marriage, run with it. But I would also argue that a much more persistent, practical, and cost-effective approach is to simply build quality time with one another (and as a family) into the normal rhythms of your daily life. It seems to me that one of the chief reasons that the warmth of intimacy fades in married life is because the marriage has not been appropriately defended from the onslaught of busyness. In our modern times, many husbands and wives go rushing from one thing to another, spending multiple evenings a week away from one another. This can be especially true of families who are in the child-rearing years. To this I would offer the following counsel: *Do not sacrifice your marriage (and family) on the altar of busyness. You need to say no to many good things in order to yes to the best things.* (We will talk more about this in the coming weeks with respect to parenting and children’s activities).

But even if you do make sure to have time together, it is not as if time alone is the answer. I might spend an hour or more sitting in the same room as other people at the DMV, but that doesn’t automatically mean I have developed any warmth or intimacy with them, does it? You can spend a lot of time together and still be distant, cold, and isolated, can’t you? This is where we must also learn to set up boundaries. Not only boundaries to protect the *quantity of time* that we spend as husband and wife, but also the *quality of that time*. Staring at our cell phones scrolling the internet is not quality time. Staring at a tv screen without any interpersonal interaction is not quality time. Sitting in different rooms by ourselves ‘*doing our own thing*’ is not quality time. That is not to say that there is no time for these kinds of activities. But, to use the image given in our verse, all of these sorts of practices are the equivalent of scooting away from the other person, not drawing nearer to them. Thus, when

this becomes the defining practice of your married life (and family life), you should not wonder why the warmth has faded from your friendship and the cold has rushed in.

What makes a marital friendship warm is enjoying good conversation together as you look into one another's eyes, laughing at the events of life as you recount your day, knocking out the dishes side by side, exploring a new subject, hobby, or skill, crying on one another's shoulder through hard times, simply taking a walk, etc. We all knew this once. It was part of how our marital friendship was first formed. But in the busyness of modern life, as well as through the intrusions of many forms of modern technology, most of us would have to acknowledge that we have, at least in part, forgotten how to simply enjoy the daily presence and companionship of our best friend and spouse. It can be deeply intimidating to try to fan these faintly burning embers back into flame. We can get embarrassed when we try to start a conversation but the other person isn't interested. We can feel rejected when we pursue and they withdraw. Long-standing habits in the home can be very difficult to overcome. But no matter how hard it might be to rekindle the warmth of friendship, we *must* make the effort, and pray that God would be pleased to bless our endeavor to faithfully keep the vows of our covenant. A cold marriage can never be a happy marriage, nor a strong marriage, nor a marriage which rightly resembles the relationship between Christ and the Church.

Q: *What are the things crowding out quality time for you and your family?*

Q: *What might it look like to block out sufficient sections of time for you and your spouse to enjoy one another's company?*

2. Tenderness

But in addition to *time* is also the necessity of *tenderness*. No amount of time or effort can rekindle the warmth of a friendship where tenderness is absent. Often times people try to renew the intimacy of their marital friendship in all the wrong ways. They try to buy intimacy through some lavish purchase, some expensive restaurant, or some exotic trip. But the fact is, while all of those things may have their place, none of them will ever be a sufficient substitute for simple acts of tenderness. Just as a fire that has died down can only be rekindled through gathering soft tinder and gently blowing on the coals, so it is with a marital friendship. Haven't we all seen the married couple out to dinner who are both staring at their phones rather than talking to one another? Haven't we all seen the family who splurges on a vacation because they think that a week of luxurious adventure will somehow make up for the coldness that has persisted in the daily rhythms of the home all year long?

Dear ones, time together is extremely important as we have noted, and sometimes fun experiences can be a great benefit to the family, but without tenderness the true warmth of marital intimacy will simply not be sustained. If we would love our spouse as God has called us to, then it must become the daily practice of our lives to speak to one another with words of kindness and in tones of love. There must be times each day when we slow down and simply put our arm around the other person to tell them how much we love them, or to laugh at ourselves together. Our spouse needs to see, hear, and feel our devotion to them not chiefly in the things we buy for them, but in the ordinary moments of everyday life as we put their needs and desires before our own. Expecting relational intimacy without persistent tenderness is like asking someone to cuddle up to a porcupine or to hug a cactus. We should not wonder why the relationship has grown cold when our daily behavior toward our spouse is persistently prickly and wounding.

Q: *What is one way that you need to renew your tenderness toward your spouse in the rhythms of everyday life?*

4. Friends provide strength to overcome challenges. (Ecc. 4:12)

"¹²And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken."

Allow me to briefly fill out the imagery contained in this verse. If you are walking down the street and suddenly get attacked, there is a fair chance the attacker "*might prevail against*" you since you are "*alone*." In that sort of fight it would be one person versus another. Whoever is stronger is likely to defeat the other. But if instead of walking "*alone*," you had another person by your side, it is far less likely that the attacker would "*prevail*" because your friend would be able to stand in your

defense and fight with you on your behalf. In that case, the odds turn to be in your favor because “two” people standing together are almost always stronger than “one.”

This is yet another picture of the benefits gained through strong and devoted friendship—especially the friendship between a husband and wife in marriage. When the friendship of a marriage is healthy and thriving, the “two will withstand” almost anything that can be thrown at them. A family unit that loves one another deeply can face great hardships and yet not be overcome. Why? Because unity is a tremendously powerful thing. Two people who are united to one another in selfless devotion are exceedingly difficult to conquer because they always have *double-strength*—that is, they always have the added support and defense of their friend to help them fight their battles. But if the friendship within a marriage breaks down, each person loses the benefit of the other’s protection. Even though they are *formally* married, they are *functionally* walking “alone,” and therefore they are much more easily conquered by the trials and tribulations of life in a fallen world.

If we would know the blessing I am describing within our own marriages, then we must consciously fight for unity with one another. Moreover, we must be quick to restore the breach whenever our marital unity is disturbed. The fact is, every crack in the bond between a husband and wife is a point of weakness that diminishes their resilience and multiplies their vulnerability.

So how do we fight for this kind of unity and seek to restore it whenever it is damaged? You can read 1,000 books on various marriage techniques—and I am sure that you will pick up some helpful hints along the way. But the best book on marriage you can ever read is simply the Bible. This is because the single greatest way to foster a thriving marriage is to strive with all your heart to be the Christian man or woman God has called you to be in his Word. Every passage of holy Scripture that teaches us about the kind of holy and loving character we should have as God’s children, is a passage that is teaching us how to better love and honor our spouse. This is because being a godly spouse just means being a faithful Christian within the context of marriage. That is, keeping Christ at the center of all the attitudes and actions of our life. When your friendship within marriage breaks down, you are essentially walking “alone.” When your marriage is strong, you are able to stand as “two” rather than “one”. But when Christ is at the center of your marriage, he becomes the golden thread that binds you and your spouse together in such a way that no matter what you must face in this life, your “*threefold cord will not be quickly broken.*”

Three More Traits of True Christian Friendship

We have considered the wonderful cluster of verses from Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, but the gifts of friendship don’t stop there. They also extend into other key areas of life. Allow me to point out three more benefits of Christian friendship with the remainder of our time.

5. Friends sharpen one another as Christians, and push each other to grow. (Proverbs 27:17)

“Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.”

This verse is often quoted in reference to the relationships between men. But the word “man” here refers to all of *mankind*, not to the *male gender*. This verse is teaching us that when two people have a strong friendship, the result of their connection is that both of them are “*sharpened*” by the other—that is, through their interactions they encourage one another to achieve their full potential. This “*sharpening*” feature should be true of all our Christian friendships. But it should be especially true within the friendship of marriage.

There is an old adage that says, “*The couple who prays together stays together.*” Now we all know that life is much more complex than that. But even still, the adage rings true. If you would see your marriage flourish, then strive to be the kind of soul-sharpening friend to your spouse that promotes their flourishing in Christ. How do you do that? Pray *with them* and *for them* daily. Open God’s Word together and encourage one another through the Scriptures. Remind each other of the gospel throughout the unfolding of life’s highs and lows. Make your life decisions on your knees and with an open Bible in your

hands. Keep one another faithful to participating in the life of the local church—not merely as a *consumer*, but as an *investor*. Most people dismiss these things as being too small and insignificant to amount to a real difference. But the truth is, these are the things that make all the difference in the end.

Q: *How has your spouse been a source of “spiritual sharpening” for you?*

6. Friends give good counsel, even when it is hard. (Proverbs 27:9)

“Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel.”

Friendship is not all sunshine and flowers. Sometimes the measure of a friend is not in the way they make you laugh or in how much fun you have together, but in their willingness to speak to you about the hard things they know you need to hear. This too is a necessary part of being a faithful friend in marriage. As your marriage unfolds over the years, no one on earth will know your spouse more intimately than you do. Thus, you will not only sit in the position of *greatest awareness* as a spouse, but also of *greatest responsibility*. When you see your husband or wife struggling with sin, drifting from Christ, or being allured by the enticements of the world, you must ask yourself: *What would a true friend do in this situation?* The answer is that a true friend would not turn a blind eye and try to *‘keep the peace’* by doing nothing. While that may give the appearance of caring for the other, it is really just another way of serving ourselves. Nor would a true friend use their spouse’s weakness as a moment for retaliation, or as an opportunity to vindicate their personal grievances. Instead, they will demonstrate their loyalty and love by seeking to address the issues in the most *approachable, helpful, and supportive* way possible. They will say what needs to be said—even if it is *hard*—but they will endeavor to do so in such a manner that has the greatest potential of doing good to their spouse. When we approach confrontation with this spirit, we prove the proverb true: *“the sweetness of a friend comes from [their] earnest counsel.”*

Q: *What kinds of things can you do to make your words of correction or confrontation easier for your spouse to hear?*

7. Friends lay down their lives for one another just as Jesus first did for us. (John 15:13)

“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

Finally, we need to fix our eyes on Christ who is *“the friend of sinners”* and the chief example for us to follow in all that we strive for as believers, (Matt. 11:19). On the night before his death, Jesus taught his disciples that the greatest expression of love is self-sacrifice. As has been said with nearly every point in this lesson, this applies much more broadly than marriage alone, but it also applies very deeply to the marital friendship.

A husband or wife will endure much in a marriage if they have a deep sense that the other person is truly committed to them in a self-sacrificing way. They will overlook many shortcomings, tolerate many challenges, and endure many hardships if they know that, in the end, as their dearest and closest friend, their spouse is willing to *“lay down [their] life”* for them. But how will your spouse know this about you? What will prove your love to your spouse so that they can have true trust in your marital devotion? They will know it in the same way that we know Christ’s love for us—not merely by his words of promise, but by the self-sacrificing deeds he performed which demonstrated their truth. Jesus did not merely *speak* of love, he showed us what true love looks like by laying down his life in our place upon the cross. Dear ones, we must do the very same thing in the daily attitudes and actions of our married life. Love must not be reduced to little more than cheap words that we utter to one another at the appropriate times. No. We must endeavor for self-sacrificing love to be the defining characteristic of our daily actions toward our spouse and family. Only then we can say that we are sincerely striving to be a friend to our spouse in the same way that Jesus has first befriended us.

“Do not forsake your friend...” (Proverbs 27:10)