



Wisdom and Friendship **Proverbs series**

We are continuing in our series through Proverbs and this morning we are going to talk about wisdom and friendship. And within the church we often talk about “community” but I think the specific topic of friendship is often overlooked but it is an incredibly important topic for life.

Because if we believe what the Bible says about us, we find that we are relational beings. And that’s true whether you are an extrovert or an introvert, male or female. We read in Genesis 1 that when God created humans he created us in his image and likeness. And being made in the image of our Triune God, the one God who exists eternally in three persons, the eternal community of God, we too are made for relationships.

In fact, one of the most shocking thoughts at the beginning of the Bible is that Adam was described as lonely, even in the presence of God. As necessary as having a right relationship with his Creator was, he also needed relationships with other created beings made in God’s image. And we do too.

But we, at least as Americans, struggle with friendships. We often struggle to make them and we struggle to keep them.

You’ve probably heard the old joke that says Jesus’ greatest miracle was having twelve friends in his 30s. We find that funny because it is incredibly relatable. Many, if not most of us, can’t fathom having a circle of close friends that large, especially as we age.

And stats on friendship in America show this. In fact, back in 2017, the surgeon general said that loneliness is the great epidemic in American life¹...and remember that was *before* the COVID pandemic, which only compounded our loneliness.

A recent survey on friendship in America shows that there has been a significant decline in the number of close friendships that Americans have. Again, the pandemic had an effect on our relationships, but even before that we were becoming more isolated. For example, in 1990, only 3 percent of Americans said they had no close

¹ <https://hbr.org/2017/09/work-and-the-loneliness-epidemic>.

friends. But today, that number has risen to 12 percent with no close friends. In 1990, less than a third said they have three or fewer, but today, half of Americans say they have three or fewer close friends.²

But again, COVID wasn't the only culprit in our loss of meaningful friendships. Our culture is ripe for the harvesting of loneliness. We face many obstacles in developing and keeping friendships. The culture we live in causes us to struggle to see the importance of having close friends.

BARRIERS TO FRIENDSHIP

For example, we are an extremely individualistic culture. We prize the self, we celebrate the DIYers, and that often leaves no room for others.

We are a culture made up of sinful people, which means every friendship is made up of sinful people who don't always get it right and friendships suffer loss because of sin. Many of us have a history of being hurt so we've lost the drive to trust others again.

We often structure our lives in such a way that hinders the real possibility of close friendships. We allow ourselves to get so busy that we have no margin for others. There has been a great migration of people moving to different states over the last number of years which means starting over sometimes with friendships, and that can be scary or tiring. Social media has some benefits but it has caused many to settle for virtual friendship rather than interaction with flesh and blood.

Again, there are many obstacles in the way of having close friendships, but nonetheless, friendship is an essential piece of life, and knowing how to navigate those friendships is an aspect of living wisely in this age.

The Bible has a lot to say about friendships, especially in Proverbs. So, like in weeks past we will be a little all over the place so try to follow along the best that you can with the verses, but I want us to consider three main ideas on friendship:

- I. The Influence of Friends**
- II. The Characteristics of Good Friends**
- III. The Comfort of the Greatest Friend**

II. The Influence of Friends

Maybe the greatest lesson in Proverbs about friendship is that **wisdom is shown in whom you choose as your friends.**

I had an old pastor who use to say, “Show me the books you read and the friends you spend time with, and I will show you what kind of person you will be in 5 years.”

Now, we should probably expand that to more than the books we read but also include the YouTube videos you watch, podcasts you listen to, news channels you follow, and so on...but the point is that the person or people we expose ourselves to the most, will be the most influential people in our lives...**and the wise know that, so the wise person will pursue a good friend and value that friend when he or she finds them.**

In fact, Proverbs speaks to the difficulty of finding that faithful friend...

Proverbs 20:6

Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love, but a faithful man who can find?

There is incredible joy to have that good friend in your life and real sorrow when that good friend moves away or you move away from them because good friends are a treasure in this life.

So, to be wise means to pursue and value good friends, but **that also means that the wise, then, avoid bad friends.**

The call over and over again in Proverbs is to embrace wisdom, to hear her call, and follow her all the days of our life. We also find the counter-example of embracing wisdom in Proverbs as embracing friends whom Scripture would characterize as evil.

Notice the contrast between wisdom and wickedness...

Proverbs 4:10-17

10 Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many. **11** I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness. **12** When you walk, your step will not be hampered, and if you run, you will not stumble. **13** Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life. **14** Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil. **15** Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on. **16** For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong; they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble. **17** For they eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence.

Proverbs 13:20

Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools suffer harm.

Again, we are greatly influenced by those we allow into the inner circles of our lives.

One writer helpfully identified the outsized influence of our friend group in our lives by describing it as the “concept of ‘everyone’.”³ What she meant by that is the experience of looking around at those closest to us and viewing them as a representation of “everyone.”

For example, when your close friends get married, it might feel like “everyone” is getting married. Or when your friends are buying homes, it feels like “everyone” is getting a house. But is that true? Is that true of “everyone” you know or just a handful of friends?

What she is describing is the outsized influence those who are closest to us have on the way we think, believe, and act. Sometimes that doesn't have too bad of implications, but what about when your close friends start to believe and teach bad theology? Or what if they hold sinful attitudes toward others or the church? It's easy for those ideas, beliefs, and actions to start to gain momentum so much so that false theology or disobedience to Christ becomes reinforced. Eventually, you begin to think “everyone” believes this or “no one” believes this, or “everyone” is doing this when in reality it is just your close friend circle.

The point is, we are influenced by our friends more than we often realize and the wise person recognizes this and they seek out and cultivate good friendships.

So, it's good to reflect on those we have in our friend group. It's good to consider if we are being wise in whom we are allowing to have influence in our lives.

And should you be so blessed to have a good friend, it's good to recognize him or her as the treasure they are. Let them know how thankful you are for them in their life.

Now, the wise recognize the influence of friends in their life, and thus seek good friends, but how does the Bible describe a good friend?

1. The Characteristics of Good Friends

I'll give just a few examples from Proverbs...

III. Good friends are not put off by adversity.

³ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/friends-shape/>.

Proverbs 17:17

A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.

Good friends don't run at the first sign of difficulty. They don't walk away when things get tough. Superficial relationships might be like that, but not close friendships. Rather, a good friend is there for you at "all times" and even in the midst of "adversity."

That might be adversity that arises within their own life. Perhaps it is something they are walking through and they need encouragement, advice, prayer, your time, and more, and a good, close friendship says I will give the time and bandwidth you need for me to walk with you through this difficult season.

It might be adversity that arises within your friendship. Again, every friendship is made up of two sinful people which means we are bound to hurt one another in some way at some time, but a good friend says I'll address the sin, and even more, I'll forgive the offense. Good friendships are characterized by a strong resilience that bounces back when they are tried.

In fact, since friendship is described as "love," it can be helpful to apply what 1 Corinthians 13 says about love to friendships. For example, good friends are:

...patient. They can overlook the other person having a bad day and taking it out on them.

...kind. Friends are generous and, well, friendly with one another.

...do not envy one another. They genuinely desire the very best for the other person even if they don't experience it themselves.

...don't boast and are not arrogant. They don't have this need to impress the other person by bragging and gloating.

...not rude. They aren't inconsiderate or insensitive to the other person.

...don't insist on their own way. They aren't selfish but genuinely desire the happiness of the other person.

...aren't irritable and they aren't resentful. They don't roll their eyes when the other person calls, texts, or needs a favor.

...don't rejoice in wrongdoing, rather they rejoice with the truth.

All in all, good friends bear all things, they believe all things, they hope all things, and they endure all things. Again, a good friend is someone who is not put off by the difficulty of friendship but instead willingly accepts the challenge of being there for the other person.

B. Good friends are close - not just emotionally, but close *physically*.

Proverbs 27:10

Do not forsake your friend and your father's friend, and do not go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity. Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away.

That proverb depicts wise friendships as those that are physically near and readily available.

I think this is really important for us to consider because many have become dependent on the virtual relationships found on social media. Even though there might be some interaction through commenting or messaging, there isn't any opportunity to see the person face to face and have any real in-person interaction where we can see another person laugh, give them a hug, or shake their hand.

I also think that because we are a pretty geographically mobile culture, we are a people with the ability to move easily, we might be tempted to view old relationships as sufficient for what we need, even if we live hundreds or thousands of miles away.

For example, I have a best friend from growing up in Oklahoma. We met in 3rd grade and since then we were like brothers. But eventually, I moved away and the relationship changed. We were still great friends, we were in each others' weddings, when I go visit back home I typically catch up with him over a meal, but I shouldn't neglect developing and cultivating deep friendships here just because I already have a good friend a thousand miles away.

We need friendships marked by more than just a long history, we need friendships that are in close proximity.

Maybe you are fresh out of college and you have close friends from there but now you live in different cities, try to make new friendships. Maybe your closest friends live a half hour away or more, try to cultivate new friendships that will allow for easier access into one another's lives simply because you are physically closer.

And this is related to a third characteristic of a good friend...

C. Good friends are honest, even when it hurts.

When we talked about unwise speech a few weeks ago we mentioned flattery as a form of lying. It is saying to someone's face something you would never say about them behind their back. It is being dishonest with them.

And good friendships aren't characterized by that kind of speech. Good friends don't say what they think the other person wants to hear. They don't say the things that protect themselves rather than what would best serve the other person. Rather, good friendships are marked by honest counsel.

Proverbs 27:5-6

5 Better is open rebuke than hidden love. **6** Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

Proverbs 27:9

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

Good friends will be able and willing to say the hard thing. And this is actually very good because we need someone in our lives who can point out the blind spots of our hearts. We need people who can ask difficult clarifying questions about our motives and behaviors. Doing so will only benefit us, if we respond with humility and gratefulness. We can actually be sharpened by good, honest friends.

Proverbs 27:17

Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.

And the person best able to do this for us, is someone close enough to us to be familiar with our lives, who know our hearts, who know our hopes and fears, who walk with us through life.

By the way, this takes someone near you, someone who is around you often and is familiar with your day to day to day or, at the least, week-to-week life.

All in all, wisdom is shown in seeking out good friends *and being* good friends.

We want to have friends who treat us these ways and we should strive to be a friend like this with others.

But we know that we all fail at this. We've all had people in our lives whom we considered close friends only to have them hurt us, walk away from us, or betray us. And the truth is, we may have been that person to someone else as well.

We haven't been loyal like we should have. We haven't loved them through adversity like we should have. We haven't been honest in our counsel like we should have. Where can we find comfort as we consider the wreckage of failed friendships and our fear of future failed friendships?

Well, we can find comfort from the greatest friend, Jesus.

III. The Comfort of the Greatest Friend - Jesus

What Scripture calls us to is Christ-likeness in all spheres of life, including friendships. So when we consider what a good friendship and good friend is, we realize all of it finds its perfection in Jesus, who has come and called us his friends.

We find this incredible interaction between Jesus and his disciples in John 15...

John 15:13-16

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

14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. **15** No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. **16** You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.

Consider what the disciples might have felt at that moment. By this point, the disciples had experienced all kinds of incredible things with Jesus that had shaped their view of him. They've seen him heal the sick, they've seen him miraculously feed thousands, they've seen him raise the dead, they've heard him teach with authority, and they had come to believe that he really was who he said he was. He really was the Son of God, come to take away the sins of the world.

And now, in the Upper Room just before this arrest and crucifixion, Jesus, God in flesh, looks across the table at his disciples, and calls them friends. And he does the same to you and me. Those of us who have seen his glory, turned from our sins, and trusted in Christ, now have the privilege of not only calling Jesus Lord and Savior, but also friend.

And he is the greatest friend who succeeds in every way that we've failed. He is the friend who will always be loyal to you. You will never find out he has betrayed you or talked about you behind your back. He is the friend who is perfectly honest with you even when it is hard to hear, but he is honest because he desires the best for you. He is the friend who was truly born for adversity, who loves at all times, enduring our

foolishness, sin, and selfishness. He is the friend who literally laid down his life out of love for you, that you might have life yourself.

Jesus is the greatest friend you will ever have and he invites you to know him in that way and find comfort for all the ways others have failed you and comfort for all the ways you've failed others.

And as we come to him, we find grace to heal from the wounds of broken friendships, grace that enables us to become the friends others need, and we find an eternal friendship with Jesus that is actually greater than friendship but true brotherhood.

So look to him this morning.

CONFESSION

PRAYER

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

John 6:40

For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

VERSES

Proverbs 20:6

Proverbs 4:10-17

Proverbs 13:20

Proverbs 17:17

Proverbs 27:10

Proverbs 27:5-6

Proverbs 27:9

Proverbs 27:17

John 15:13-16

John 6:40

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you found friendship easy or difficult?
2. Have your friendships changed over the years? Since the pandemic?
3. How have your friendships influenced you, both positively and negatively?
4. Why is commitment and loyalty so important for a good friendship?
5. Why should we cultivate friendships that are geographically close?
6. Do you have anyone who is honest with you?
7. Have you ever thought of Jesus as a friend? How might that impact your relationship with him?