



## True Friendship

Proverbs 13:20; 17:17; 18:19, 24; 20:6; 25:17-20; 26:18-19; 27: 5-6, 9, 17  
Grace Church | 8.15.21

This week we continue our time in the Proverbs of God by examining what they collectively have to say about friendship. There is something about friendship that is nobler, stronger, more virtuous, more Godly even, than all other types of relational love. Before we get into these Proverbs themselves, I want you to take a moment and consider the significance of friendship in your life. Do you value it? Would you say that friendship plays a significant role in your life? Who are your friends? Chances are you are racking up quite a lot of names and faces in your head. HOW many are true friends? . Believe it or not, I think what we will see today in our text today is that Scripture values friendship as one of the highest relational goods.

At some point or another, we seemed to have lost this understanding of the value of friendship. We throw around the word friend, but when the rubber meets the road too often we realize we lack the richness of friendship we thought we had. But it's not as if it is hidden knowledge. The ancient Greeks actually understood friendship in this way. Aristotle taught that there were three kinds of friendship, but only one is true friendship.<sup>1</sup> First, you can have a sort of "friendship" that is based on utility—a political relationship or a companionship that is mutually beneficial for both parties—and this is quite common. We are "friends" with our co-workers because we benefit from it. But the problem is, our needs change—and therefore these friendships are not really lasting. Secondly, you can possess a sort of "friendship" that is based on pleasure: we have "friends" that we really only get together with to do things that we enjoy, and we share mutual interests, but in the end, when we were in need, we really couldn't count on them. These kinds of friendships, argues Aristotle, are common with young people, who accrue lots of companions and love interests in the pursuit of pleasure, but find very little lasting friendship. But there is a third of friendship that is *true* friendship: this friendship is based on mutual love, mutual sacrifice, and mutual affection. It's like Jonathan and David: based on covenant, through thick and thin. It requires great virtue, and is itself a virtue. It's this kind of friendship that is rare, lasting and true. And it's this kind of friendship, I believe, that is often all but lost today.

In his book *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis attributes the modern loss of the value of friendship to it being the most "unnatural" or least "biological" of loves.<sup>2</sup> In other words, friendship is not

---

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis *The Four Loves*.



something that comes easy to us. We are knitted together with family naturally, we are drawn in romantic love almost like magnets, but friendship requires work, it requires choice, it requires virtue. At first glance, it feels unnecessary even. We need familial love and romantic love, because without them we wouldn't even be here—we would not have been born or raised! And we need political companionship, utilitarian companionship, or otherwise we would live in a chaotic society. But true friendship feels like an add on. None of the tabloids are concerned with who is friends with who, they want to know who is romantically involved with who. And none of the papers care who the politician's friends are—they want to know who his political allies and enemies are. Friendship is a secondary, tertiary thought, and it takes a back seat primarily in our culture for a search for the pleasure of romantic love and the utilitarian benefit of social or political relationships. Friendship is nice, but it's not really worth all the effort.

Biblically speaking, wisdom speaking, nothing could be further from the truth. So today I want us to examine the significance of true friendship, the substance of true friendship, and the shape of true friendship.

## **The Substance: What is true friendship?**

### **True Friendship is Rare**

I want to stress first that the Biblical expression of true friendship is not a dime a dozen. This will become clear in almost every proverb we will examine, but take a look first at **20:6**, the first proverb on your list there.

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

The emphasis here is on the word *faithful*, which carries with it the connotation of testing. There are plenty of potential friends in the world, plenty of people who are more than willing to enter into some sort of friendship with you, to proclaim that they will be a man or a woman of steadfast love, that they will be the sort of friend that keeps covenant. But in reality, there are precious few who pass that test. The ones who pass the test, this proverb is showing us, are not those who say, but those who *act*. How do you tell a true friend from an untrue friend? One talks big game, the other shows it. One is untested, the other is tested. And these kinds of friends are incredibly rare. But they are valuable, because they are dependable, they are faithful, they can be trusted not because of what they proclaim, but because of their proven track record.

Look at that second Proverbs, **17:17**. Here we are also shown both the rarity and the difficulty of friendship.

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



This kind of proverb is actually a contrast: it's not saying one thing about friends and another about brothers, it is trying to compare the two. What is the difference between a brother and a friend? On one hand, it is good to have a brother around. The word here for brother literally means blood relative. They are *born* for adversity, meaning they are born into the role where they will come to your aid when things are tough. That is a good thing, to receive support when you need it. But a true friend is better. Why? Because first they aren't born into a relationship with you, they choose it. And second, because they are not just there for times of adversity, they are there at *all* times. They choose to love, and a true friend loves at all times. You've heard that phrase: "he is like a brother to me?". Well as it turns out, a more appropriate compliment for a close love is "he is like a friend to me". A true friend is more valuable than a brother, which is repeated to us in **18:24**.

A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend that sticks closer than a brother.

There are certain kinds of relationships that are easy to come by: companions, for one. Social friends are not true friends, they are easily acquired. Lewis says that companionship is the blueprint for friendship, but it's not enough. Friendship is not less than companionship, but it is much more. It's quite simple to arrive at companionship—you must find a simple hobby or proximity that links you to someone else. The thing about companionship, however, is that that bond is also shared by hundreds or thousands of others. It's the bond you feel when you are alumni of the same school, or when you enjoy the same kind of music. But it's not a bond of love. A bond of loving friendship must be established by something deeper, something more specific, something on the level of the *soul*. Again, Lewis says it like this:

The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one."

In other words, you can have many companions, but few friends. That conversation of: "I thought I was the only one", that movement from loneliness to friendship, is rare. That's no accomplishment. In fact, the more interests you have, the more companions you are likely to accrue. But those companions aren't knotted together at the level of the soul, and so when ruin comes, who will pull you out of the depths, who will hold the rope for you? Not them. Lonely again. But a true friend moves through companionship and into unity. So when ruin comes, they are closer than any companion, closer than even a brother.

### **True Friendship is Valuable**

The kind of value in friendship outlined here is three-fold. First, there is an osmosis effect of true friendship that we are taught in **13:20**.

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



It's curious that we don't value friendship as highly as we should, when in reality it is the primary influencer of our later years. When we are children, of course it is our family that has the greatest influence. As we move into adulthood, we also are influenced by mentors, teachers, professors, coaches. But once we reach that place of autonomy, it is our community that shapes our identity, not the people we are given, but those we choose. And so whoever we walk with will be of immense value to us: good, true, wise friends make us good, true, and wise. But the opposite is true—surrounding ourselves with false friends, companions who are full of foolishness, will make us foolish too. There is inherent value in friendship, because God has created it to be inherently formative.

The second value of friendship is aesthetic in nature. Friendship is not just practically forming, it is sweet and beautiful, we find in **27:9**.

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

Here friendship is compared to the most valuable things of the ancient world. Oil and perfume are natural elements that are mixed together to create something appealing. And in this time, sweetness was not something that could be artificially concocted. Remember, they don't have sugar. They couldn't make everything sweet as we do today—instead sweetness was naturally discovered. It was found in honey, in certain fruits, etc. The proverb is teaching us that friendship is similar: it cannot be artificially made, it is beautiful for beauty's sake. The value of friendship comes in *earnest counsel*. Earnest here is also translated as passionate. A friend is not artificial, he is earnest. He is not flattering, but his counsel is genuine. Friendship may not seem necessary to the pragmatist, but it is worth pursuing because of its inherent worth and beauty. As Christians, we value our friendships not for what they can give us, but because they show us a picture of the beauty of God.

The third value of friendship proverbs teaches us is in its sanctifying effect. The reason that those who have wise friends become wise is that the good friends are not afraid to be honest, candid, and bold. Let's examine a few particular proverbs:

**27:5-6** Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

**27: 17** Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.

This first proverb here is another comparison. An "open rebuke" is a strange thing, because what would a hidden rebuke be? Something is really only classified as a rebuke if it is said out loud in correlation to someone. Same with "hidden love". Love that is never expressed is not really love at all. But the oxymoron is part of the point. The proverb is saying that you may feel offended or you may dislike to be rebuked, but all rebuke is meant to be open. And better that is is given to you out in the open, because now you can confront it. Hidden love is of no value to you—and so if you are



faced with the choice of being loved in the dark or rebuked in the light, you should choose the rebuke. Why? Because a rebuke has the opportunity to be done in love. Friends don't keep things in the dark. Their rebuke, like their love, is always out in the open.

This is clarified by the second oxymoronic part of this proverb. Two oxymorons are presented: a "friendly wound" and a "wounding kiss." These oxymorons only make sense with an understanding of true friendship. It is far better to receive a rebuking wound from a friend than a fake kiss. A friend is not afraid to give love that is at times painful. These are the kind of friends we need: not always jabbing us, but loving us enough to say something when they need to. Make no mistake, if you are always afraid to confront your friends, your love is being hidden in the dark. It's as useful as the counterfeit kisses of flattery. Friends don't flatter, friends tell the truth in love. May we be a church who is so full of gospel confidence that we can do the same. But I'll get to that in a moment.

This kind of bold and friendly "wounding" is actually beneficial. The proverbs say it is like flint: iron sharpening iron. Two metals rubbing against each other create sparks, they create friction, it's not always easy. But it is good and necessary and sanctifying when done in love. True friendship is valuable because of the good company, for its beautiful genuineness, and for its sanctifying friction.

### **True Friendship is Difficult**

The last marker we have here of true friendship is a bit harder to define. We can first find its shape in some negative examples. Look at this set of Proverbs from **25:17-19**.

Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house, lest he have his fill of you and hate you.

A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a war club, or a sword, or a sharp arrow.

Trusting in a treacherous man in times of trouble is like a bad tooth or a foot that slips.

What is going on here? The proverbs are advocating for the wisdom of moderation first. There are many ways that friendship can go wrong. Too much time with a friend and you no longer become a friend but a dependent. One false word, and it's as if a war chest is opened up. Friendship also opens us up to the possibility of treachery. We can be duped and taken advantage of, betrayed. When that happens, and trouble comes, it's as if the rug is pulled out from under us. What is supposed to be solid, like a foot or a tooth, is not rotten and wobbly.

Friendship can also be broken, or shown to be false, by an inappropriate response when times of trouble come. True friendship is fitting to the moment. Look at **25:20**.

Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on soda.



How do you know a true friend? A true friend always has an appropriate response. Like Romans 12:15 teaches, a true friend “Rejoice[s] with those who rejoice, weep[s] with those who weep.” Singing a glad song to a heavy heart is not the response of a friend. It’s like hearing of your friend’s mother’s death and brushing it off with humor. To do so is to expose them like being without a jacket on a cold day, it’s like pouring vinegar on soda ash: it bubbles up and creates an unwanted reaction.

And when that happens, when friendship suffers, it is hard to get back. **18:19 shows us that.**

A brother offended is more unyielding than a strong city, and quarreling is like the bars of a castle.

The word “brother” here is used not just for blood relatives, but also for friends, and that is the connotation here. A companion or a friend that is offended, a friendship that is broken, that is revealed to not be genuine, is nearly impossible to build back again. It’s like the bars of a castle, which is a picture of the strong iron bolt that secured the castle gate. Friendship, Proverbs is saying, is so rare and so valuable that it is also precarious. A true friendship lasts, and so we must realize that it is going to be difficult. It doesn’t come easy or even “naturally”, it requires effort, precision, and wisdom. Fools don’t build true friendships, and quarrelers don’t keep them.

So here we have a picture of friendship from the proverbs: it’s rare, it’s valuable, but also it’s difficult. Things can always go wrong. And if we are not careful, we can end here. If we go back to Aristotle’s three kinds of friendships, and we think about our relationships, it can be quite depressing. Most of our “friends” are really just companions that we keep around for pleasure or for utility. And I could send you out these doors with a grim view of friendship and a disappointing reality that you may work your whole life for friends and never quite get there. If Aristotle is right, and the only way to get true friends is to be a true and virtuous friend, well then we are left in a bit of a bind. None of us are steadfast enough to meet all these standards. If friendship only arises from our own virtue, than we should pity ourselves: true friendships will be like winning the lottery. And for most people, they are—things of myths. But for Christians, we have better news.

## **The Solution: Where Does True Friendship Come From?**

**True Friendship arises from the good news of the true suffering friend, Jesus Christ.**

What all of these proverbs of friendship have in common is very simple. They see friendship not as a philosophical ideal, but something more transcendent. Friendship, like wisdom, begins with the fear of the Lord. Because friendship is not just valuable and rare, it is an echo of God’s own righteousness.



True friendship, as it turns out, is not an add-on. It's part of the very goal of God's redemption. As a culture, we may not write many books about friendship anymore, but God did. I want to argue today that the Bible is a story of friendship. In Genesis, Adam and Eve walk with God in the garden of perfection. They are not in need of many companions—they have each other, and that sameness leads to intimacy. But friendship is not just about sameness. In the garden, Adam and Eve were different from each other in important ways, but they were the same in many important ways too. But God, God is not like Adam and Eve. He is not of the same species, he is not built for fitting in with them, he is not built for romantic love or sexual love. All of those kinds of love originate from his creativity in creation. God did not create Adam and Eve to be engaged in romantic love with them, that is a silly notion. But the kind of love that God pointed towards Adam and Eve in Eden was two-fold: one, it was a familial love, a love of a Father to a child. God is this love because he is Father. But secondly, the love of God for mankind is also, from the very beginning, a brotherly love. When he walked with Adam and Eve in the garden, opening himself to them and loving them at all times, what Adam and Eve heard was: "you are a friend of God."

Now, this kind of reality should rightly give us pause. A *friend* of God? A son, a daughter, yes I think we can understand. A servant, a subject of the king, yes. But a friend? How is this possible? Again in *The Four Loves*, Lewis describes friendship differing from romantic love in that lovers stand face to face, enamored in their own gaze. But friends stand side by side. So if this is accurate, and I think this is the picture Proverbs has given us of friendship when it has talked about bearing and loving in adversity and being faithful, side by side at all times, if this is accurate, that what I am saying is that we are created to stand not just on our knees before God, although that is true, but to stand side by side with God as friends? Isn't that offensive to a transcendent God, to stand side by side with his creation who has rebelled against him and rejected him? It's that sacrilege? Isn't that blasphemy?

No. It's not blasphemy, it's gospel. Yes, it's hard to believe. But that's what makes it good news. In Eden, God walked with Adam and Eve as friends. And in the new Eden, we again will walk with God side-by side in the beautiful love of friendship. How? It's through Jesus Christ the son. Jesus Christ became like us, to walk side-by-side with us, to share in our human condition, so that in him we might walk side-by-side with God. It's not something God was forced into: no, like true friendship, it was his choice. He was willing to step down to our level and risk being betrayed, which he was. And you know, before his death, he is reasoning with his disciples and trying to show them what his love means, what his sacrifice on the cross will mean. He is trying to show them the secret of God's plan, the reason for his incarnation and death and resurrection. And what does he say? "Greater love has no man than this: that he lays down his life for his friends." The love of friendship, he says, is formed in sacrifice. So here I go, to lay down my life. Why? So that Jesus can look at all those who trust in him and say these gospel words: "No longer do I call you servants, but I have called you friends."

Friendship is valuable, rare, and difficult. But moreso, it's a picture of God, the true friend. And where does friendship come from? Not from our own virtue, no. True friendship arises from the



freedom that comes in knowing that no matter how hard you blow this whole freignship thing, Jesus Christ has made you a friend of God.

So we gather into communities like this church. And what happens? Over time, with grace, with wisdom, with trust in Jesus, we make true friends. It's supernatural, it's priceless, it's a slice of heaven. There is no explanation for true friendship apart from the gospel of Christ. There is no way we can explain why sinful people with different interests, different colors, different backgrounds, different ages, different politics, and different bank accounts can become true friends. The only way is through the mutual friendship of union with Jesus Christ, the true friend. He must be true, if friendship is. Here is hope: because Jesus lives, in his timing, we can share in the heavenly joy of true friendship.

