



Proverbs Friendship

Summary: In a world of lonely people Proverbs tells us what makes a good friend and Jesus shows us by example.

School starts tomorrow for many people. Some of you will be going to new schools, starting Middle School or High School or, beginning a new semester at your college or university. You will be surrounded by new people, figuring out your schedule, finding your way around, reconnecting with people you remember from last year, and trying to sort out: who, or where, are my friends?

That's not just something students think about. Over the past few weeks I randomly came across several articles on friendship in the news: there were two in *The Atlantic*, one from *Vox*, one on NPR and another from the *Wall Street Journal*. I wasn't looking for them; they just came across my path. Friendship, as a topic, seems to be trending a bit right now.

And that makes sense when you consider the transitory nature of DC and our modern world in general. Some of you are new to the area, work brought you here over the summer and now you're settling in. Or, you've been living here for a while and now you've got new neighbors or co-workers showing up. Every summer people leave DC and new people come to take their place. New friendships are made and old relationships promise to keep in touch.

Well this morning we want to talk about friendship and see what God has to say about the subject from the book of Proverbs. This will be our last study in Proverbs; we start the book of Acts next Sunday.

The very first thing we should say: God is for friends. He knows we need them. In the very beginning of the Bible, in [Genesis 2:18](#), right after Creation God says "[it is not good for man to be alone.](#)" We were made for relationship, with God, and with others because we are made in the image of God who is essentially relational Himself.

One of the most fundamental, core, aspects of our theology is the belief in the Trinity that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in permanent, unbreakable, eternal relationship. So, there is friendship, there is companionship, and there is love, within the Godhead. God doesn't need anyone else to have relationship with, but He invites us into relationship with Himself and encourages our relationships with each other.

And it seems like we need the encouragement, because there is a lot of talk these days about an epidemic of loneliness in America. In a recent study highlighted in *Vox*, 30% of all Millennials (people between the ages of 23-38) said they feel lonely, disconnected from the people around them. That's the highest of any generation. Gen X came in next at 20% and

Boomers were the least lonely at 15%.

But perhaps most shocking was the fact that 30 percent of millennials said they have “no best friends.” Twenty-seven percent said they had “no close friends,” and 22 percent of millennials in the poll said they had zero “friends.” Zero true friends.

But, here’s some good news for you who are here this morning - church is actually a great place to find and make friends.

The same survey asked people where they made their friends. And it’s no surprise that school, work, and neighborhood topped the list – we’ll talk about why a little later. But after these, was church or their religious community. So, you’re surrounded by potential friends and we’ll talk more about how you can meet them towards the end of our time together this morning.

But first, let’s see what God has to say about friendships and how we might apply the things we learn. We start with one of the best-known and most quoted Proverbs:

Proverbs 27:17 As iron sharpens iron,
So a man sharpens the countenance of his friend. [lit Heb: sharpens the face]

We live within a web of relationships – immediate family, extended family, co-workers, teammates. But what is a friend? A friend is someone you choose to invite deeper into your life and they make you better – they sharpen you.

In Hebrew the word for friend is the same word as neighbor. You could literally translate it as ‘someone who is close.’ When the word implies relational and emotional involvement, it’s translated ‘friend’ when it implies proximity, it’s translated ‘neighbor’ but it’s the same word.

This is why I said our idea of a friend is someone you *invite* into your life. Some people are *put* into our lives – you don’t get to choose your parents, or your siblings or your cousins. You don’t get to choose who is in your class or on your team. These people are all *put* into your life.

Jesus said the greatest commandment, the most important thing we can do, is love God and love your neighbor. And, He said that metaphorically in the context of the parable of the Good Samaritan where the ‘neighbor’ wasn’t an actual ‘live-next-door-neighbor’ but someone in your path who was in need. The point was to live peacefully with everyone around you. Love all people, respect all people, seek the good of all people. Be a good neighbor.

So, does that mean I have to be friends with everyone because everyone is my neighbor? Well, no. You may *become* friends with your neighbor or your teammate or co-worker, but that happens as you choose to allow them to come deeper into your life than where life has

put them.

Another way of saying this is: we should be *friendly* to everyone, but that doesn't mean everyone will be our *friend*.

You are my neighbor because life has put us near one another; you're my friend because I invite you in. I give you special access to my life and you give me special access to yours.

Friends are unique because you don't have to have them. You aren't born into them, you aren't surrounded by them, it's not automatic. Friendship involves choosing to expand a relationship with a few of the people around me, going deeper with them than I go with the other people in life. It's optional and that's what makes friendship special. I'm not just fulfilling my obligation to love everyone, to be a good neighbor; I'm choosing to share more of my time, interests, and attention with you.

That choice is often based on affinity. You and I discover we like the same things. We like the same author, we like the same style of hunting, the same sports team, the same series on Netflix, the same volunteer opportunities or hobbies. There is something outside of us that we both enjoy.

This is why CS Lewis famously described friendship as beginning with the words, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one!"

He goes on to say the person who just wants friends, just wants to have people in their life, the person who just wants to belong, can't find friends because there's nothing for the friendship to be about. He says, "Friendship must be about something, even if it were only an enthusiasm for dominoes or white mice. Those who have nothing can share nothing; those who are going nowhere can have no fellow-travellers."¹

Do you understand how significant this is? Proverbs says

Proverbs 27:17 As iron sharpens iron,
So a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.

Friendship involves giving and receiving, sharpening and being sharpened. Friends make each other better; they do each other good. So, if you want to have good friends, you have to be a good friend, and that means having interests outside of the friendship that you can share.

You need something other people can enjoy with you. Friendship isn't based on friendship, it's based on something else, something out there that brings the two of us together – your

¹ C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves

interest in it and my interest in it bond us together and we help one another improve relative to the thing we both enjoy. We help each other achieve and accomplish and appreciate more than we could ever do alone.

So, friendship is born when you and I discover we have something outside of our relationship that we both enjoy or appreciate or believe and, as a result, I invite you deeper into my life. I give you more access to my time and attention, I create more space for you in my calendar and my wallet.

Then, what starts off with an affinity can grow into affection. I have an obligation; I have been commanded to love everyone, to be friendly to everyone. But, because you and I have so much in common, there is an opportunity for the connection to deepen and if that happens, true friendship is born.

Friendship also deepens and strengthens the more external anchor points it has. If you only see someone in one context, at the gym for example, or here at church, you may feel connected at the gym or at church, but the relationship will not be as strong as the connection you have with the person you see at the gym and have over for dinner on Friday night. Or the person you see at church and go out to a Nats game with. The more points of connection and the greater the variety of contexts your relationship has, the stronger, and more robust it will be. If you want to grow your friendship, you have take it out into more of the world.

And strong relationships are important because sooner or later, trials and difficulty will come along and you need your friends to help you make it through.

Proverbs 17:17 A friend loves at all times,
And a brother is born for adversity.

There is some disagreement among scholars about how to best translate this verse. Some say there is a friend who is so committed that it exceeds even the bonds of family. Your brother *has* to help you in adversity, but there is a friend who *chooses* to, and therefore is like a super-brother. Others say the point is: both a friend and a brother will be there for you in rough times.

But the main point I want to make, regardless of interpretation is: you are not made to suffer difficulties alone. Hard times will come, disappointments will come. And if you're part of those survey respondents who say you don't have a best friend, a close friend, or any friend, those hard times are going to be very, very, difficult to endure. Perhaps this is one reason we're seeing such a dramatic increase in suicide lately.

Life is not easy, it's hard at times, that's one reason God encourages us to have and build a network of relationships: in our biological families, in our geographic neighborhoods, and in our church communities. God made us in His image, and He is a Trinitarian relationship, so we need relationships too.

Dr William Rawlins is the Stocker Professor of Interpersonal Communication at Ohio University. He's spent decades researching friendships and in a recent interview He said: "I've listened to someone as young as 14 and someone as old as 100 talk about their close friends, and [there are] three expectations of a close friend that I hear people describing and valuing across the entire life course."

OK, listen up, because here's somebody who says, I've spent a lot of time researching friendship – talking to teenagers and senior citizens and everyone in between, and this is what they all say. They're looking for three things he says: "Somebody to talk to, someone to depend on, and someone to enjoy."² Young or old, this is what people are looking for in a friend, the circumstance of our lives may change, but what we're looking for does not. We all want: Somebody to talk to, someone to depend on, and someone to enjoy.

We've talked about the need for friends to enjoy something together, something outside their friendships to talk about, so let's take a minute and consider that second point: someone to depend on. Proverbs says

Proverbs 25:19 Confidence in an unfaithful *man* in time of trouble
Is like a bad tooth and a foot out of joint.

Sometimes you think you've got good friends, and then your life hits a rough spot – you find out your mom has cancer, or you lose your job. Your boyfriend or girlfriend breaks up with you. You don't make the list or the cut. And now you need someone to come alongside and help steady you, it's a great moment for a friend you can depend on. But if no one shows up it's like trying to eat with a bad tooth or trying to walk or run with a twisted ankle. Every movement hurts and there's no one there to help.

Crisis proves who your true friends are, who you can depend on. Friendship involves sacrifice. Intentional, willing sacrifice – I will allow myself to be inconvenienced for you beyond the bounds of my obligations.

I've got to take care of my spouse. I've got to help my parents. I must take time off work to take care for my sick kids. I'm locked into those relationships with obligations, but I *choose* to make these kinds of sacrifices for my friends, and, if they are friends, they choose to make them for me.

Do you see how this brings us back to what we said earlier: A friend is someone you invite into your life and they make you better. I love the way Tim Keller puts it: "A friend is someone who always lets you in, and never lets you down."

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/10/how-friendships-change-over-time-in-adulthood/411466/>

But to be dependable, you also have to be available. And no matter how much we want to sing the praises of technology for keeping in touch, there's still nothing like a friend showing up, in the flesh. I found this quote from CS Lewis fascinating. Writing over 75 years ago, he had this to say about the importance of friendships, he wrote:

"Friendship is the greatest of worldly goods. Certainly to me it is the chief happiness of life. If I had to give a piece of advice to a young man about a place to live, I think I should say, 'sacrifice almost everything to live where you can be near your friends.'"

Think about that, "*sacrifice almost everything to live where you can be near your friends.*" I think that's a word from the Lord for some of you. If you're going to be the friend you want to be, if you kids are going to be around the people you want them to be around, if you're going to be in a place to receive the friendship of others, you have to live close enough to be connected and involved. Texts and tweets and Facetime can only go so far, they can keep a relationship afloat, but they can't really grow it as effectively as being present.

So, we've thought a bit about why we need friendship and what friendship is, let's also take a quick look at some warnings about friendship and some practical steps we can take to build and grow friendships.

First, the warnings.

Proverbs 12:26 The righteous should choose his friends carefully,
For the way of the wicked leads them astray.

"It has been rightly said, *show me your friends and I will show you your future.*"

There are some relationships that we should avoid cultivating and encouraging, for our children and for ourselves.

Proverbs 23:19 Hear, my son, and be wise;
And guide your heart in the way.
20 Do not mix with winebibbers,
Or with gluttonous eaters of meat;
21 For the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty,
And drowsiness will clothe *a man* with rags.

The danger here is over-indulgence. In both cases, eating and drinking, can cause you to feel lethargic, to pull you away from the lifestyle of energetic diligence commended throughout the rest of the book of Proverbs. And, you will waste money unnecessarily on food and drink – the average cost of a cocktail at a bar in DC is \$7 plus tax and tip and you see how your money can disappear pretty quickly. Add a few of those to the cost of dinner and an Uber and you're out \$100 for the night – which is what someone who makes twice the minimum wage will earn for an entire day's labor.

But also notice how verse 19 started: “[Hear, my son, and be wise](#)”

Parents, it’s important to remember that a dad wrote Proverbs to his son, to give the young man wisdom for life, and who you choose to spend time with, your friends and companions are, is a subject that comes up time and time again in the book. Parents need to be talking with your kids about what makes a good friend, and how to be a good friend especially as the school year begins. And kids, you need to be open to listening to your parents, let them save you some pain – God wants parents to help in this way.

[Proverbs 22:24](#) Make no friendship with an angry man,
And with a furious man do not go,
25 Lest you learn his ways
And set a snare for your soul.

Now think about that – this is a warning about the danger of learning the wrong things from the wrong people. You’ve heard the saying that “some things are better caught than taught.” Well, if that’s true, what are the contagions you’re surrounded by? Are you learning positive or negative traits?

Which direction does the influence flow in this relationship? It’s OK to reach out to people for the sake of showing them the kindness and love of Christ, you’re not supposed to completely withdraw from the world and non-Christian people, but you have to constantly assess – how are the people I hang out with influencing me? And, am I having ANY good influence on them? Am I a thermometer or a thermostat?

A thermometer simply reflects the current temperature, a thermostat recognizes the temperature and does something about it – raising it or lowering it appropriately. Which are you?

You see, in all this talk about friends, we have to remember the important role we play ourselves. If this is truly a friendship, how are you helping each other get better?

Proverbs tells us some of the ways true friends help each other:

[Proverbs 27:6](#) Faithful are the wounds of a friend,
But the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.

A friend will tell you the truth, even when it hurts, but their motive is always to help you.

Some of you need to do the hard thing, you see something in the life of your friend, and you don’t want to say anything because it’s awkward, or it’s hard, but that’s what you need to do. You’re their friend, and sometimes friends have to wound each other instead of just blowing one another kisses or sending each other fan mail and pretending everything is great. Pray, pray, pray, for them, and then open your open your mouth and say what you

need to say to them.

Listen to this:

Proverbs 22:11 He who loves purity of heart
And has grace on his lips,
The king will be his friend.

If your motives are pure, if you're really a good friend, if you're seeking the good of the other person, your heart will be known and people will want to hear what you have to say.

Proverbs 27:9 Ointment and perfume delight the heart,
And the sweetness of a man's friend gives delight by hearty counsel.

You can do good for your friends by being good yourself. Become the man or the woman that God wants to make you, for His glory, but also for the benefit of others, for the sake of the counsel and encouragement you will be able to give.

Another way to be a good friend is keep short accounts of wrongdoing. Don't be easily offended or hold grudges, let things go.

Proverbs 17:9 He who covers a transgression seeks love,
But he who repeats a matter separates friends.

You see, at least half the effort of friendship falls on us, it's not just about what we receive, it's also what we give.

Proverbs 18:24 A man who has friends must himself be friendly,
But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

I remember taking a class in seminary and one of the men was a pastor from a church out in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. He said, you know people come up to me all the time and they say, "Hi pastor, we're new and we're looking for ways to get plugged in to the church." He told the class what they're really saying is: Hi Pastor, we're giving you three weeks to help us find new friends.

Now, there's nothing wrong with that necessarily, church is a great place to find, develop, and strengthen friendships. But you have to remember, it's a two way street, if you want to find friends, you must first be friendly. Take the awkward first step, reach out, say hello to people. After the service we put up an icebreaker question each week – it's a way to give you an opening for conversation, to meet people, and perhaps, make friends.

There's also a booklet out on the welcome table with the title How to Get Involved at the City Gates Church. It will tell you about all the opportunities people have put together for fellowship, study, and service. Each quarter we have family supper – a potluck and

baptism, the next one is next Sunday night. It's a good time to come and sit at a table with people and get to know them a little better. There's a church softball team and monthly board game night, there's the youth group for teens, and for everyone, there's a chance to get involved in ministry – serving is a great way to meet people. It's not always easy to get connected, but don't give up. Reach out to others.

And create space in your calendar for other people. In an article in *The Atlantic* entitled *How Friends Become Closer*, Professor Rawlins, who we quoted earlier said: "The opportunities for friendship come with how people's lives are organized. When I talk to students, I say 'Pay close attention to the habits you're forming, because before you know it, you have organized your life in a way that doesn't allow for the kind of friends that you would like to have.'"³

Is that true for you? Do you even have space in your life for the kind of friends you want to have? Do you have time to be the friend you want to be? And if not, what are the things you're choosing over friendship?

We've had a lot to say about friendship this morning, a lot to consider, and we've seen some very practical, applicable guidance from the Lord. But I've saved the best for last because in the hours before his arrest and crucifixion, at the Last Supper, Jesus told His disciples:

John 15:12 This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

Jesus is the best friend you could ever have. He is the friend that sticks closer than a brother. He is the friend that sharpens you like iron. The one you can confidently trust in, the one who will be there for you when the rest of life seems to fall apart. He is the one who promises never to leave you or forsake you. The one who promises to walk with you even through the valley of the shadow of death. He tells you the truth, and when He wounds you, it is always for your good. He does not withhold good from you, but offers to do exceedingly, abundantly, beyond all you could ever hope or imagine. Jesus says, if you need a friend to hope and depend on, put your faith and trust in Me, I'm willing to lay down My life for you.

And then, with the strength, comfort, identity, and confidence you find in Christ, He can send you out to be a source of strength, comfort, and help to others in His name, to be the friend He wants other people to have.

Christian, we are about to walk out into a world full of lonely people. There are lonely people in here among us, perhaps you're lonely yourself. You need friends, we all do. But everything starts with Jesus. Look to Him, receive from Him, then share what you find in

³ How Friends Become Closer, [The Atlantic](#),

Him with others.

Let's pray.