

I. Introduction

[Greeting]

While I was preparing the message this week another pastor reminded me of an experience I had a few years ago. In the summer of 2020 I had the opportunity to go on a backpacking trip in Colorado. A group of pastors and church planters were given the chance to go and from beginning to end this trip was a saga. It had been planned in 2019, then it happened in 2020 so for a minute we weren't even sure if we'd be able to go. We got to Colorado and it was the first time I'd really seen mountains. Like real mountains. I remember driving on a two track road through this valley, standing in the sun roof of our truck, blasting the *Legends of the Fall* soundtrack. It was incredible. And before we started our hike up this mountain in CO, we prepared for our trip at a lodge. And at the lodge our guides had us lay out all the gear we were going to pack into our backpacks. Each of us was going to carry 40-60 pounds of gear. And some of that gear was essential. All of us had to have a water bottle. Each one of us carried food for our meals. That was non-negotiable. And then our guides would take a look at our piles of stuff and point out things we could do without. A sleeping mat. A tent. Extra pairs of underwear. (All of those seem essential to me, but apparently not!) Some things were non-essential for the journey and other things were absolutely crucial.

This summer we've been looking at the subject of wisdom to see how the bible leads us to be the kind of people who know how to walk in the path of God's flourishing. And one of the things that the scriptures do is point out those essential things that we can't do without on the journey of wisdom. If you want to be wise you have to desire wisdom, you have to fear the Lord, you have to love God's Word, you have to avoid foolishness and be slow to anger... And today we're going to talk about something that is relatively rare, underemphasized, undervalued, and even confusing to many in our world today; but it's something that the bible says is absolutely crucial for walking in wisdom: and that is friendship. If you want to be wise, you need wise friends.

The way of wisdom is not made to be walked alone. We need godly friends to walk the path of wisdom with us. That's the truth that I want to delve into today and to get there were going to talk about (1) our need for friends, (2) our need for the right kind of friends, and (3) how to have that kind of friendship.

II. Our Need for Friendship

We're going to be all over the book of proverbs today, but let's start with the text that was read just a minute ago. 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." Often in the Proverbs the words "friend" and "neighbor" are interchangeable, so this verse is saying, *Don't neglect friendship. When things get hard, when suffering comes, you should run to your friends. A friend close by is better than family far away.* So what the Bible is doing pretty plainly here is elevating the importance of friendship far above how we typically think.

My guess is that for most people having friends is like a nice bonus. A non-essential luxury that we can enjoy after everything else is taken care of. So if our work is done, if our families are taken care

of, if our extracurricular activity is checked off the list, if we've had enough time to decompress, and if we've caught up on our shows and social feeds, then yes, friends are a nice little addition. C.S. Lewis has a famous essay on friendship in his book, "The Four Loves" (which I highly recommend to you) and one of the things Lewis observes is that friendship is the least instinctive, the least biologically important, the least necessary of all our loves. And what he means is that if it wasn't for erotic relationships, none of us would be here. And if it wasn't for familial relationships none of us would have been reared. And most of us have to interact with others to some degree at work. And we can't get by in society without some sort of civic interaction with one another. All these relational interactions are, in a sense, pushed on you, but friendship doesn't force itself. It doesn't make babies or rear children or make us money. We are a very utilitarian people (we're Americans so we value productivity and efficiency) and friendship doesn't have an immediately obvious utility. It doesn't exist for the purpose of productivity and it is not efficient, so we see it as just gravy. Just an extra luxury to have if you can afford it. And most of us are so pressed by the demands of everything else that we don't feel like we can afford friendship.¹

We often let friendship get squeezed out of our lives, but listen to this. In 2023 the Surgeon General released an advisory document on the epidemic of loneliness and social isolation in our country. It cites research that shows that approximately half of U.S. adults report experiencing loneliness and that when people were asked how emotionally close they felt to others, well over half said they did not feel very connected to other people. And the reason that this is so urgent that the Surgeon General would raise the alarm about a loneliness epidemic is because it's been found that, despite the fact that our western instincts would lead us to see friendship as non-essential, loneliness and social isolation can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. And the report takes time to detail how lack of connection with other people is associated with anxiety, depression, dementia, even things like an increased risk of heart disease and stroke.²

So look at how the wisdom of science overlaps with the wisdom of the Bible! It's almost like they have the same source! Both social science and the book of Proverbs say that friendship is essential! The unique love of a friend brings something into your life that is different than that of a lover, different than that of your family - something that is essential for being a wise person. Tim Keller says, "The book of Proverbs continually says, fools perish either for lack of friends or for poorly chosen friends..."

Another wisdom book in the bible, Ecclesiastes, says, "Two are better than one...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!" (Ecc 4:9-10).

So if you and I want to find flourishing and if wisdom is the path God gives us toward flourishing, then friends, you and I need to see that we were not made to walk alone. We need friends to walk the path of wisdom with us.

¹ Lewis, C. S. The Four Loves. HarperOne, 2017. (74-75)

² [Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connections and Community](#)

But did you hear that quote from Keller? Proverbs doesn't just tell us that fools perish for lack of friends. It also tells us that fools perish for poorly chosen friends. We don't just need friends. We need godly friends to journey in wisdom alongside of us.

II. Our Need for the Right Kinds of Friends

So not only do we need friends. We need the right kind of friends.

- Proverbs 13:20, "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm."
- Proverbs 22:24-25, " ²⁴ Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, ²⁵ lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare."
- Proverbs 28:7, "The one who keeps the law is a son with understanding, but a companion of gluttons shames his father."
- Proverbs 14:6-7, "A scoffer seeks wisdom in vain, but knowledge is easy for a man of understanding. Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge."
- Proverbs 20:19, "Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a simple babblers."

In all these different ways the scriptures are warning that we are like meat in a marinade. We will take on the flavor of those we spend time with. We are not simply who we choose to be, we are what our friends make us. Show me who is around you and I'll show you where you're going.

So maybe that makes you think, gosh I really want to have wise friends. And if that's your thought, then maybe a question you could ask is, *Well how do I know which friends are wise? How do I know if I have wise friendships?* And that's a really good question. If we need to choose friends wisely, then we should consider the characteristics of wise and godly friends. Three characteristics of wise friends: (1) Wise friends love steadfastly, (2) Wise friends counsel earnestly, (3) Wise friends encourage eagerly.

Wise friends also love steadfastly.

- Proverbs 17:17 – ¹⁷ A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.
- Proverbs 18:24 – ²⁴ A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.
- Proverbs 27:10 – ¹⁰ Do not forsake your friend and your father's friend...

We've all had relationships with people that were built around the scaffolding of our circumstances. You work with someone. You're part of the same exercise class. Your children play together often. You have the same hobbies. But if the scaffolding of the circumstances is removed - your job changes, the hobby goes away - then the relationship falls.

Many of our relationships are fair-weather friendships, but true friends are there when seasons shift and when there is nothing to be gained from their relationship to you. In fact Proverbs seems to be saying that real, true friendships are revealed in the moments of adversity, when sorrows rise, when suffering comes. The man of many companions has a whole network of people, but if his life comes to ruin the friend (notice it's in the singular) sticks closer than a brother.

So when your life comes to ruin, look around at who is there. That's when your wise friends will be revealed because wise friends love steadfastly.³ A wise friend shows up with the party supplies when the joys of life come and they are still there when you are in pain. When sorrow compounds on sorrow. When you are too weak to offer anything, a wise friend says "I'm here. Let's pray. Let me serve you. Let's not rush to problem solving, let's be sad and mourn together. I'm not here because of how it benefits me, I'm here to love you with a love that is consistent and faithful and steadfast.

Wise friends love steadfastly when their friends are being difficult to love. When they have been wronged they're not easily offended. They don't keep a record of wrongs. Bitterness doesn't take root easily in their hearts. Misunderstanding and conflict are worked through, not ignored or run away from because their love for you is steadfast. It's not going anywhere. It's not dependent on circumstances, it's bigger than that.

Lewis's most famous thought from his writing on friendship is that a friendship is formed when two or more people discover that they have something in common which, until that moment, they each thought was their own unique treasure or burden. He says, "The Typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, 'What? You too? I thought I was the only one.'"⁴ And he goes on to say how this is unique to friendship because while erotic/romantic love is experienced face to face, the love of friendship is experienced shoulder to shoulder as you share the same truth, the same goal, the same project. You walk together. And Lewis says this is why people who just want friends can never make any. Because the condition of having friends means to fix your hearts on something else together. Friendship has to be about something and if that thing is flimsy or fleeting a friendship will not last. And this is why followers of Jesus have the raw materials for being the best steadfast friends. Because the deepest thing about is the most rock solid thing in the world. If you are a Christian you can look across this room and say to every other Christian, "What? You too?" And you can build a firm friendship on the rock solid foundation of Jesus.

Now that isn't to say that we can't be friends with people who aren't Christians. And It isn't to say that within our closest circle of friends there won't be more layers of common passions and common interests. But it is to say that within this whole diverse body of Christ, no matter who you are, if you are in Christ, you have the raw materials to love the body of Christ with the steadfast love of friendship.

Wise friends love steadfastly. Two more characteristics that we need to move through more quickly.

Wise friends counsel earnestly.

- Proverbs 27:9 – ⁹ Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest 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 29:5 – ⁵ A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet.

³ Heavily dependent on Jamin Roller's Sermon, "Wisdom & Friendship"

⁴ Lewis, C. S. The Four Loves. HarperOne, 2017. (82-83)

Wisdom wants us to see that the goodness of friendship comes from the honesty of wise friends, even if what he or she has to tell you is hard to hear. The words that make us feel good are poisonous when they come from a flatterer, but words that feel like wounds are faithful when they come from a friend.

Wise friendships can handle hard conversations. Wise friends can engage in and receive conflict and correction and emerge on the other side with an undamaged bond of love that has actually been strengthened by the conflict. Beloved, this exhortation to welcome the honest feedback of a wise friend is so against the flow of our culture. We are so averse to conflict and correction today. How common is it to dismiss people or relationships as toxic. So many voices today are giving permission for us to extract ourselves from hard relationships because they are “toxic.” And don’t mishear me. Some people are toxic and some relationships are harmful. And we shouldn’t be flippant with who are in relationship with. That’s why Proverbs wants us to pick the right friends. But we live in a culture that has lost the art of friendship and I fear that many of us are just grabbing hold of an excuse to exit uncomfortable, difficult relationships because we don’t know how to be steadfast friends who welcome the correction and counsel of others.

How many friends do you have who you have explicitly invited to correct you if they see your life drifting in a direction that it shouldn’t? Do you have anyone who will reprove you? If you don’t, then you may be in danger of living as a fool. Proverbs 9:7-8 says, “⁷ Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury.⁸ Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you.” The fool walks alone. Remember the way of the fool is right in his own eyes. The fool is confidently marching toward death and destruction and they don’t want anyone giving them counsel on their way. They hate correction. The wise love reproof. They expect correction. They invite the counsel. They are humble and so they know they can’t do it on their own and need fellow travelers on the journey toward flourishing in God.

Wise friends love steadfastly and wise friends give and receive counsel earnestly.

Wise friends encourage joyfully

The wounds of a friend are faithful, but wise friends don’t only deal in hard correction. They love to build up one another.

- Proverbs 27:17 – ¹⁷ Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.

Wise friends seek to sharpen one another and that sharpening doesn’t only happen through correcting, it also happens by celebrating God’s goodness in one another. Proverbs has a lot to say about the foolishness of flattery, but it is not empty flattery to sharpen another by verbalizing the specific ways you see the glory of Christ-likeness increasing in the life of your friend. It’s the opposite of foolishness to look at another person and see the ways that God uniquely wired them to display his glory and to see them becoming even more themselves through God’s Spirit at work in them and to gush about God’s goodness on display in them. In fact, to have a friend who you have invited to correct and reprove you, who knows you in your un-impressiveness, to have them say to you - I see God at work in you in these ways. The Lord is at work through you in these areas. I’ve seen you mature and grow in these specific ways. That is the oil and perfume that make the heart glad; that is

the sweetness of a friend. Romans 12:10 says, “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.” Have you been that kind of wise friend? How can you do so all the more?

Wise friends love steadfastly, wise friends give and receive counsel earnestly, and wise friends encourage joyfully. That’s the kind of friend that we are meant to seek and that’s the kind of friends that we are called to be because the way of wisdom is not made to be walked alone. We need wise, godly friends to walk the path of wisdom with us.

IV. The Art & Habit of Friendship

So for some of you, you might hear that and think “Alright. Let’s go! I’m ready for the benediction. Let’s go make some friends!” And then many of us might feel a certain degree of insecurity. Like, “Well all this biblical information about wise friendship is good. I want that, but I don’t know how to cultivate it. People are hard, relationships are awkward, and I’ve been burned before and I’m scared.”

So for all of us, I want to invite you into five strategies for cultivating wise friendships. I heard someone call them five arts and habits. They are art because they are a skill you need to develop an instinct for, which you only do through practice and instruction. And they’re a habit because consistency is the key.

1. **Vulnerability** – Lewis said, “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.”⁵

Being known is so much better than being impressive. To be truly known is not easy, but it is the first step toward wise friendship. Who can you wisely share your heart with? And how can you be the kind of person who others trust with their heart? You need people who know you so well they can wound you, but instead they love you steadfastly.

2. **Commitment** – Cultivating wise friendships happens when we make and keep commitments to each other. We could all stand to be a little bit more like kids on the playground who just say, “Will you be my friend?” Because life is a lot more like high school dances than we realize. Most people are just standing around waiting to be invited. And when we verbalize an invitation and give a name to what we’ve doing - let’s cultivate a friendship - there is an element of making a commitment in that.
 - a. Caveates - committed friendship don’t require a life-long covenants. This isn’t a forever commitment, but in a world where we tend to treat people and relationships as disposable and utilitarian, we should be a people who have steadfast sticking power.
3. **Time** – One study shows that it takes roughly 50-100 hours of interaction to turn acquaintances into casual friends. Another 50 - 150 hours to transition from casual friends to friends. And about 120 to 220 hours of interaction to move from friends to good friends.⁶
So remember this when you’re trying to build relationships!

⁵ Lewis, the Four Loves, (155-156)

⁶ Article, [“How Long Does It Take to Make A Friend?”](#) by Kira Newman

4. **Embodiment** - Online tools are not sinful, but they're like Oreos. Even though it's easy to eat the whole sleeve, we really should have one or two and reserve the main course for the real food. The main course of our relationships should be embodied, in person interaction because we are embodied people. We're not just brains on sticks exchanging information. And we are not the projection of ourselves that exists online somewhere. God gave us bodies and wise friendships are made to be built on the foundation of face to face, should to shoulder interaction in our bodies.
5. **Hospitality** - The best place to practice vulnerability and embodied commitment over a long period of time is in our homes, around our tables.
And more than that, but talking about hospitality, I'm trying to point out that wise friendships aren't exclusive clubs. They're hospitable circles that are always ready to welcome in someone new. This is how we turn the dial of wise friendship from being inward focused to outward focussed. This is how we become friends on mission together.

IV. Spiritual Friendship

Alright beloved, as we land the plane, here's what we need to see: we aren't just talking about wise friendships so that we can solve America's loneliness epidemic. Sure, a nation full of lonely people would greatly benefit from recovering the art of wise friendship. But friendship on it's own will not satisfy the deep longing of our souls. Saint Augustine famously wrote, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee."⁷ You and I were made for friendship with God! If we walk in wise human friendships for long enough we will learn that even the wisest human friendships here are appetizers for something deeper and better.

In John 15, Jesus said to his disciples, "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." Outside of Christ, we were far off from God, strangers to his promises, enemies of his kingdom and our hearts long to be near him and ache for relationship with him. But now, in Jesus those who are far of can be brought near by his blood shed for us on the cross. When Jesus called his disciple his friends, he was explaining to them the nature of his love for them. Not love from a master to a cringing servant, but love as one who lays down his life for his friends. Jesus is the wisest, greatest, perfect friend.

The bible often uses human relationships as way to help us understand something about our relationship with God. It tells us our relationship with God the Father is like an adopted child in Christ. Or human marriage is meant to be a little picture of Christ's relationship with his church. But the bible never does that with friendship. The bible never tells us that friendship is *like* this or that aspect of our relationship with God. And I think it's because friendship isn't LIKE our relationship with God. Friendship is our relationship with God through Christ.

And here's what's true friends: one day Christ will return and he will make all things new and the dwelling place of God will be with man and we will live with him together forever. And in that new city, friendship is the kind of relationship that will characterize every interaction. No more enmity, no more

⁷ Augustine, Confessions, 1.1.1.

misunderstanding, no more conflict. Every single person will link arms side by side fixed on the glory of God together. The bonds of earthly family will fade. Jesus says that marriage will not exist in heaven. But don't be discouraged or afraid. It's not a taking away of that which is so precious. It's a transforming of silver into gold. None of our Christian relationships will disappear, every single one will be transformed into a friendship more glorious than we have yet experienced.

And brother, sister, this is why wise friendships mark the way of wisdom. Because every aspect of wisdom is fitting us for eternity in friendship with God and with one another. So let's aim to prepare well with wise friendships as we wait for that day.