

The Wise Friend: Proverbs

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Sunday, October 13th, 2013

We're in the midst of a short study through several of the themes in the book of Proverbs. So far we have looked at the fear of the Lord, wisdom and folly, words, and today friendship. Coming up next week will be a sermon on sex and marriage (and, remember, this is important for the young people to hear— Proverbs is especially geared toward young people, so I hope you'll be here next week to learn the wisdom of guarding your purity and how to wisely pursue marriage someday and how to evaluate a potential spouse). The following week will be Reformation Sunday, and I'm going to do a biographical sermon on the life and testimony of Augustine. Then, continuing in Proverbs, we'll talk about parents and children, work and money, mercy and justice (I added this one to the list as I've been thinking about Proverbs), and finally God's sovereignty, which will lead us back into our study of Romans, picking it up in Romans 9.

This morning we'll be considering the theme of friendship. I want to start with an exhortation to all of us to choose friends wisely. Then we'll think about the greatest friend of all, who is Jesus Christ. And then we'll look at three characteristics of the wise friend. The wise friend is faithful, discerning, and honest.

[I'll be quoting several verses from Proverbs and other places. Some of the Proverbs we put in the worship folder, so you can have them right in front of you without needing to turn lots of pages. And then a few of the verses I'll refer to are in Proverbs 27. So when we come to the characteristics of a wise friend, you can look at those verses on the worship folder as well as the verses I'll cite in Proverbs 27.]

Choose Your Friends Wisely

A couple weeks ago, in the sermon on wisdom and folly, I really tried to speak to the young people here. I want children and teenagers here to love wisdom. I want you to have the joy and the excitement in your life of pursuing wisdom and becoming wise. That is the good life. It's a life directed toward God, and therefore it's a life of enjoying the most amazing Being in the universe. The life of wisdom will bring real joy and will spare you from meaninglessness and emptiness. Folly may be fun for a short time, but it will ruin you in the end.

Well, something that's very important as you seek for wisdom is to choose your friends wisely.

“Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.” (Proverbs 13:20, ESV)

Do you understand that? Do you believe that? As a young person, you may pride yourself in the thought that you are your own person. You are totally independent, and nobody is going to influence your decisions. Well, that may be an exciting thought, but it's just not true. The way you dress, the way you talk, the music you listen to, the TV shows and movies you watch, the books you read . . . it's all impacted by certain people whom you allow to influence you. So the big question is: who are you allowing to influence you? I could tell you a lot about yourself and about where the path of your life is leading, simply by talking to your friends. Are they respectful toward their parents and teachers? Are they hard-workers? Are they honest? Do they look to God's Word as a guide to life? Do they believe the Gospel? The people around you, the people you really listen to, the people you like, are going to have a huge influence on you. That influence could be for good or for bad, which is why we must all choose our friends wisely.

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers [that is the pathway of foolishness – the wise, blessed person does not follow that path]; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.” (Psalm 1:1–3, ESV)

“Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals.”” (1 Corinthians 15:33, ESV)

Be careful the company you keep. There may be people around you at school or at work who are very amusing. They may be very funny and fun to be around. But you have to consider: is he or she the kind of person I want to be. Do their morals reflect the wisdom of God, the fear of the Lord? In light of this, some of you may have friendships that you need to end. There may be people in your life who are pulling you down. Don't fool yourself thinking that you are unaffected by those individuals. Don't minimize the kind of impact they are having on your life. Be very careful. You must recognize that friends will influence you, so be wise in choosing friends.

The Greatest Friend of All: Jesus Christ

The most important friendship decision you need to make is whether you are going to be a friend of God or a friend of the world. In the New Testament book of James, we find just this contrast.

“Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” (James 4:4, ESV)

Now, this will be a real crossroad for some of you. You cannot walk the fence. You can't go along with sinful activities that the world says are cool, and at the same time call yourself a Christian. James 4:4 says that if you're a friend of the world then you are an enemy of God.

So the fundamental thing that needs to happen in your life is that you need to have Jesus Christ as your friend. The Good News is that He will do that for anyone who calls out to Him. He will be your friend. None of us deserve to have Him as a friend. We deserve to be punished for our sins and put out of His presence forever. But Jesus laid down His own life for us in order to befriend us.

“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends [that's what Jesus did for us]. You are my friends if you do what I command you [that's an evidence of being a friend of Jesus, we are changed, we follow Him, we obey Him]. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave 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. 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.” (John 15:13–16)

There's great hope in that. Jesus chooses His friends. And our great Savior treats us as true friends. There is closeness in our relationship with Him that is nothing short of miraculous, given the fact that He is divine and we are depraved. So come to Jesus, asking for His forgiveness and His friendship. And then live in the joy of having Jesus as your friend.

Like the hymn we sang, “What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged; take it to the Lord in prayer. Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share? Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to the

Lord in prayer.” Who do you go to in a time of need? You go to your real friends. You go to those who will listen and empathize and help and give good counsel. Well, who can do that better than the Lord, Himself? Go to Him in prayer. Go to your friend, Jesus Christ.

Your friendship with Jesus is going to affect every other friendship in your life. If you’re not a friend of Jesus, then you are an enemy of God, a friend of the world. Therefore you will walk in the counsel of the wicked and stand in the way of sinners and sit in the seat of scoffers. That will be your life. But if you are a friend of Jesus you will walk with the wise, and you will have a very special bond with other friends of Jesus. I hope that’s your desire: to nurture friendships in your life that will spur you on in your friendship with Jesus.

We do have to think of the goodness of God in creating friendship. God created us in His image, and part of God’s existence (for all eternity) has been the experience of community. The God of the Bible, the true God, is a Triune God. There is one God who exists in three Persons. So for all eternity, the Father, Son and Spirit have dwelt together in joyful fellowship with one another. Being made in God’s image, we also have a craving within us for joyful, life-giving fellowship with others. We need that in our lives, and that is a good thing. It’s part of the beauty of God’s design. We depend on one another. We lean on each other. We were made to grieve with one another, and rejoice with one another.

But here’s the thing: if we don’t have Jesus as our greatest friend, if we are not finding our identity in Him, then our relationships with others will be strained because we will fundamentally be “takers.” To be a good friend, you do need to receive help and encouragement, but you also need to be able to give encouragement and help. But if you’re not in Christ, then you have a void in your life that nothing else can fill, but you will try to fill it with all kinds of things. And you will try to use other people to numb that pain (that emptiness) deep inside you.

When your hope is in Christ, and you are trusting that He will supply every good thing for you for all eternity, that frees you to be a giver, not just a taker. It frees you to interact with another person as an inherently valuable being, made in the image of God, rather than treating that person simply as a means to getting something I think I want.

This is why a friendship with Jesus is so foundational. That relationship is central to every other relationship. So if you want

good friendships (and I hope you do want good friendships—we were made for it) then focus first and foremost on your friendship with Jesus. Find your identity, your worth, your purpose, in Him. And then you'll have the capacity to be a good friend, and the wisdom to choose good friends.

A Friend is Faithful

Now let's look at several verses that describe some of the characteristics of a good friend—a wise friend. These are things we should look for as we're trying to choose friends wisely. And more importantly, they are things we should pray God will foster in our own lives, so that we can be a good friend to others.

“A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” (Proverbs 18:24, ESV)

Looking at the original Hebrew, that word for companions could be literally translated in this context as “Facebook friends.” Someone with many Facebook friends may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

I read an article about Facebook friends. A study found that one out of three people don't even like their Facebook friends enough to spend time with them in person. They're happy to see their pictures and know the gossip, but only about 10% of their Facebook friends would they actually get together with. We need to realize that we live in a society of many very shallow relationships.

But a real friend is faithful. A real friend is like Jesus, who sticks closer than a brother. These relationships are rare. They are hard to come by, so we should cherish the true friendships we have and also know that seeking out true friends is not always going to be easy.

“Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love, but a faithful man who can find?” (Proverbs 20:6, ESV)

A true friend will be there in the tough times. That's when you discover who your true friends are.

“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” (Proverbs 17:17, ESV)

So a friend, like a brother, is going to be there in any and every situation. The wise friend will not disappear when times become difficult.

You know, friendship is not glamorized in our society. It's romantic relationships that get glamorized. But there is a story that has become very popular that is all about friendship, and that is *The Lord of the Rings*. That is a story about friends who stay together, even through very intense struggles. In the first part of the trilogy—The Fellowship of the Ring—Frodo is heading off on his journey and feeling like he is supposed to do this on his own.

Sam says to Frodo: “Begging your pardon, sir! But I mean no wrong to you, Mr. Frodo, nor to Mr. Gandalf for that matter. *He* has some sense, mind you; and when you said *go alone*, he said *no! take someone as you can trust.*”

“But it does not seem that I can trust anyone,” said Frodo.

Sam looked at him unhappily. “It all depends on what you want,” put in Merry. “You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin — to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours — closer than you keep it yourself. But you cannot trust us to let you face your trouble alone, and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo. Anyway: there it is. We know most of what Gandalf has told you. We know a good deal about the Ring. We are horribly afraid — but we are coming with you; or following you like hounds.”

That's the faithfulness of real friendship. I'm not going to let you go through this alone. I'm going to stand by you and help you along the way. Friendship is faithful through thick and thin.

Proverbs also says some interesting things about how money can affect relationships. If someone has a lot of money, they will have a lot of people wanting to be their “friend.” If someone has very little money, those “friends” disappear.

“Wealth brings many new friends, but a poor man is deserted by his friend.” (Proverbs 19:4, ESV)

“Many seek the favor of a generous man, and everyone is a friend to a man who gives gifts.” (Proverbs 19:6, ESV)

“The poor is disliked even by his neighbor, but the rich has many friends.” (Proverbs 14:20, ESV)

This is just one specific example of how shallow relationships work. Remember what I said about being a taker. If you are not secure and satisfied in Christ, then you will be a taker in all your relationships, in one way or another. You'll view

people as a means of getting something else that you want, whether that's money or power or prestige or applause or pleasure of some kind.

Don't be a rent-a-friend. Don't be someone who is there for the good times, and looking for some payback. Don't be a fair-weather friend.

Another aspect of a friend's faithfulness is overlooking an offense.

“Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.” (Proverbs 17:9, ESV)

This is an important thing to bear in mind in our relationships. Do you want friendships that will last through the years, through the decades? Well then you need to give some grace. Because the only perfect friend you have is Jesus Christ. Every other friend is going to let you down in some way, at some time. They might say something insensitive. They might even say something intended to hurt your feelings. The wise friend will cover that offense, seeking love. But the one who repeats that matter again and again, who doesn't forgive, who becomes embittered, who gossips . . . that will be the death of that friendship.

My challenge to you on this point is to think about those things that friends have done that hurt your feelings, that you have remained bitter about—Who might you need to go back to this week and say, “I'm sorry that I was so hard on you. I'm sorry I didn't forgive. I'm sorry that I have remained bitter against you. I don't want to lose your friendship.” I challenge you to be a friend who overlooks offenses.

A Friend is Discerning (thoughtful, sensitive, tact)

A wise friend will be sensitive to the responsibilities of his or her friend. A wise friend does not overstay their welcome.

“Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house, lest he have his fill of you and hate you.” (Proverbs 25:17, ESV)

Now, there's something we need to understand about proverbs here. There's something we need to understand about interpreting the proverbs. Proverbs are not meant to be read as absolute, air-tight declarations that have no exceptions. If you read the proverbs that way, you'll get very frustrated and discouraged. For instance,

“Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.” (Proverbs 22:6, ESV)

Well then what about the children who grew up in godly, Christian homes and then walked away from the faith in adulthood? Does that mean we have to say to those parents: well I guess you failed? Or does it mean that the proverb is not true? No, to put yourself on the horns of that dilemma means you don't understand this genre of literature. Proverbs are general truths that communicate much wisdom, but they are not promises that hold in every case. So Proverbs 22:6 should be an encouragement to parents to be diligent in training their children in the ways of the Lord. But it should not be a stick used to beat up parents who have wayward children.

We'll talk about that verse more in the sermon on parents and children. The point I want to make now is about Proverbs 25:17. We can't take this too rigidly. The proverbs convey wisdom, and they also require wisdom to know how to apply them. And that is the case here.

If you took this verse too rigidly, you might think that you can hardly ever spend any time at your neighbor's house or friend's house. But that's not the point. The comment was made at our Tuesday morning Bible study: In our society, we probably need the opposite exhortation. We need to be told to spend more time with our neighbors and friends.

The point of this proverb is to be sensitive to the responsibilities that your friend has. Realize that you are not the only person in their world. Don't be overbearing. Don't try to make your friendships exclusive. Give the person space. Seek wisdom to know how you can be a blessing to your friends and not a drain.

Another way that the wise friend is discerning is by being sensitive to a friend's mood.

“Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on soda.” (Proverbs 25:20, ESV)

Vinegar on soda creates a violent reaction. Removing a coat on a cold day is not pleasant. And neither should you act chipper when your friend is somber. You shouldn't make it seem like everything is wonderful in the world when your friend is in the depths of despair.

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”
(Romans 12:15, ESV)

Not too long ago we were studying the great verse of Romans 8:28, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” That’s a great verse, but it might not be the most sensitive verse to quote right away when you go to talk with a friend who is hurting. It may or may not be. I guess it depends on the situation. But oftentimes, the most sensitive and loving thing you can do is simply be there. You don’t have to theologize everything that’s going on. You don’t have to sing a happy song, for that might be more discouraging than helpful. The wise friend will be sensitive and discerning in this way.

A Friend is Honest

The specific point here is that friends ought to be honest and courageous to speak the truth in love to one another. It’s easy to feel like we wouldn’t ever want to rebuke or correct a friend, because then maybe we’ll lose that friendship. And it’s true, that could happen. But then you have to ask, What is the friendship worth if we can’t ever help one another along in the fight of faith. We all have blind spots, and we need friends around us who are willing to point those out to us.

Lydia Brownback, in her book *A Woman’s Wisdom: How the Book of Proverbs Speaks to Everything*, she has a quote from a women’s magazine *Marie Claire* where a woman wrote, “Even if a friend is saying the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard, I don’t contradict her—because I wouldn’t want her to be negative toward me.”¹ Well, that may be the world’s perspective.

God’s perspective, given to us in the book of Proverbs, is this:

“Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.” (Proverbs 27:6, ESV)

That’s such a profound contrast. Like the woman who said she will never contradict her friend, there are plenty of people who will shower praise on others. But that’s not friendship. Enemies can do that, like Judas who betrayed Jesus with a kiss.

A true friend, a wise friend, will say the hard things, even though it is hard to say. The reason it’s hard to say is because we don’t want to unnecessarily hurt our friends. It pains us to see a

¹ Brownback, page 76.

friend wounded in any way. It wouldn't be so hard to say if we didn't care how it might make that person feel. But we say it because even deeper than our desire not to hurt their feelings is a desire to protect them from folly and sin. So the wise friend goes to that uncomfortable place to say, "I care about you and therefore I want to point out this thing that I've observed in your life that doesn't seem quite right. I want to help you and pray with you and hold you accountable." Those are the faithful wounds of a friend.

Again, we need wisdom in applying this proverb. I would be concerned if anyone said that this was their life verse and they think they have the spiritual gift of rebuking. No, don't be too zealous in this. We shouldn't be quick to admonish. But neither should we always be silent when we observe something concerning in the lives of our friends.

"Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel." (Proverbs 27:9, ESV)

"Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another." (Proverbs 27:17, ESV)

We need to recognize our need for earnest counsel. We need to recognize our need to be sharpened. And we also need to strive to be a friend who can offer wise counsel and thus sharpen and strengthen our friends.

To review, then: Be wise in choosing friends. Look to Jesus Christ as your greatest friend. And seek to be a friend who is faithful, discerning and honest. Let's pray that God would give us these kinds of friendships that will be a means of our sanctification and will build up this church and be a witness to a hurting world around us that is desperate for true friendship.