

Wise Friends
Proverbs 18:24
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PD Mayfield

If you have your Bibles, please turn to Proverbs 18:24. As you're turning there, I just want to draw your attention to the series that we are in. We're looking at Proverbs in the month of January. And last week, we heard how Proverbs 1:1-7 serve not only as the introductory verses of the book, but they also signal the interpretive grid for the entire book. And then it moves into a larger unit all the way through the end of chapter 9. And that's kind of an important chunk of the book of Proverbs.

Our passage today goes into what's known as the Proverbs of Solomon. And they expand from chapters 10 through the middle of chapter 22. And we'll be looking at one of them today as we look at the topic of Wise Friends.

As we're looking at this series in the book of Proverbs, there is an invitation to know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight. And we'll see in this verse, but all of the words of Solomon, and even for that matter, the words of the other wise sayings found in Proverbs. These are held out as a demonstration of a life of wisdom that's anchored in a relationship with the Lord God.

Today's passage shows us particularly that living wisely involves wise friends. So, here now as I read from God's word Proverbs 18:24.

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

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Father in heaven, help us to hear and help us to understand. Help us to apply, that we would see and hear the wisdom from your lips, that we would forget and disregard what is presented as my wisdom. May those things that are in contradiction to your word, may those be easily forgotten. But where my words match up with your words, may they be a meditation of my heart, may they be a reflection of your truth, and help us to walk in your ways and your wisdom. And we do this by grace through faith. And we're so thankful for how you walk with us as the wise teacher. Help me, the teacher, as we discuss this today. And we pray for your Spirit's illumination of our mind and our heart to know these things and to live these things. In Jesus's name. Amen.

The Great Gatsby which is written by F. Scott Fitzgerald tells a story of wisdom and folly. And such tales are a tale of tragedy. And these tales of tragedies showcase the angst of our hearts and the failures of our choices. And if you remember that story, you may remember the end. While swimming in his lavish pool, Jay Gatsby is shot dead. And during his life, we see Gatsby wishing and striving and living in a way that's lavish and rich in order to win love and esteem from others, and particularly from Daisy. And we also witness others wishing to get something from him because he is wealthy. But in his death, only a few people stuck close by his side. Out of all of Jay's companions, only his father, a few servants, and Nick attended the funeral.

And whether you or I have many friends or whether we have few friends, friendship is a type of bond between people that reflects something fundamental to our human existence. We're created to know someone. We're created to be known by someone.

And we know this story from the beginning in Genesis when God made man and woman in His own image. Adam and Eve and all of their offspring, humans were created first and foremost to know God and to be known by God. And being made in His image, we were also created with the capacity and the curiosity to know and to be known by others. And we crave this deep intimacy. And the reality is though it may have whispers and gaps between the experiences, this deep intimacy that we do crave, it

can exist in our lives. In this quest of our lives for deep connection and trusted friendship, we pursue the knowledge of God. And Proverbs can be a guide that can teach us in living wisely with wise friends.

As we discuss this topic today, I want to address three main sections briefly: seek, practice, receive.

First, we seek wise friends. And as we briefly discussed already, we're created for community. It's based in who we are as image bearers of the living God. We're made in His image for His glory so that we may participate in His creation. And that desire for close companionship is good.

As a matter of fact, it's not good to have this desire absent from our lives. We live in an ever expanding, fast-paced, hyper-connected world, and yet more and more people will identify loneliness and isolation. There have been studies that demonstrate the correlation between loneliness and isolation and how it increases symptoms of anxiety and depression.

An article for The National Institute on Aging has stated that research has linked that social isolation and loneliness, which go together but are mutually exclusive at times, pose higher risks for a variety of physical and mental conditions such as high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, weakened immune system, anxiety, depression, cognitive decline, Alzheimer's disease, and even death. There's a correlation with those things.

Although we may have a wide variety of experiences, we all share that common desire for friendship. Tim Keller says this about this ache and desire we seek. He roots it in creation. "Adam was not lonely because he was imperfect, but because he was perfect. The ache for friends is the one ache that is not the result of sin." God made us in such a way that we cannot enjoy paradise without friends. Keller goes on to say that "God made us in such a way that we cannot enjoy our joy without human friends." Adam never had a dry time. His communion with God was pure. And yet, Adam needed friends.

Now, in the story that we experience from our birth to our death, we don't share that brief moment of perfection that Adam and Eve had in the garden. But as time went on and as the world expanded, we experience both the ache, which is good, but we also have a different ache because it exists out of the brokenness and imperfection.

19th century pastor and theologian J. C. Ryle said this about the state of that imperfect world and our need that remains for friendship. "This world is full of sorrow because it is full of sin. It is a dark place. It is a lonely place. It is a disappointing place. The brightest sun being in it is a friend. Friendship halves our troubles and doubles our joys."

I pray that each and every one of you and myself included, I pray that we have one person that is true of us, that halves our troubles and doubles our joys. When I was a kid, my parents would sometimes say I was a little social butterfly always wanting to be with my friends. And they would say, you will be very lucky in your life if you end up middle years and older, and you can count the number of friends on one hand. And I thought that was the most ridiculous thing ever. That can't be true. I almost witness that as sadness. But now in my middle years, I see the wisdom of that. The experience of that is also very poignant.

We see here in verse 24 that it's in this section of the Proverbs that might feel disjointed. It's just saying after saying. Some of them might be connected. There might be a cluster of things that are connected and are building off each other. But it is sometimes hard to sit down and read Proverbs one after the other and kind of make sense of it.

But here, we have Solomon giving these Proverbs. And it's in the context of the first nine chapters. It's in the context of wisdom personified. It's in the context of the role of the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, that we are in a relationship with God in His covenant, in His community, and we're seeking to embody and embrace and appropriate His wisdom.

This section is full of short pithy statements, but they're meant to be understood in light of a person's character that's shaped and formed by that wisdom that comes from the Lord. And out of that character, a person applies that wisdom to a multiplicity of situations that may be experienced in life.

And so, it's important for us to remember the book of Proverbs is not merely good generic advice, nor are they comprehensive commands, nor are they promises that if acted upon you are guaranteed the prosperity of your obedience to them. Now, some Proverbs have an imperative force to them. It truly is wisdom to live it out. The theme of most of scripture as you walk with the Lord in His covenant with His people and you go in the ways of the Lord, it will go well with you. We see that time and time again. And when we break from those ways, it does not always go well for us. As we embrace wisdom from the scriptures, we direct our lives to follow the character of God in the community of His people.

So, let's look briefly at this verse in its parallel structure. In the first line, we see that there is a relationship that is compared with the relationship in the second line. And this relationship is actually contrasting two sets of associates, first, the many companions, and then second, a close friend.

This word for "companion" is a very common word. It has a wide semantic range. It can be used for "neighbor." It can be used for "friend," kind of like associates. It can just be broad like "another person." And so, here, we see a broader term applied to the relationship. And this Proverb puts this particular relationship in the context of circumstances in the man's life, particularly ruin or to be broken into pieces.

The poetry of the line is broad enough that the reader is to imagine the very circumstances that might take place. We're not given any context for what the ruin is, how it came about, or what transpired after it. But as we go through our lives, we interact with our daily circumstances, our relationships. And there is a general proverbial sense of how this is true.

Briefly, I do want to make a comment about a translation matter that is interesting, but it doesn't impact the overall meaning of the passage. Some scholars translate the Hebrew structure of the original language to read either "a man of many friends comes to loss," so focusing on the man who has many friends who experiences a circumstance, or it can be translated "there are friends who serve to bring one to loss." So, is it the man who has many companions that it just experiences ruin? And we kind of understand what's happening with those companions based off the contrast in the second line. Or is it having many friends is actually what causes you to come to ruin?

There's a subtle difference between the two. But ultimately, what is happening in the text is the focus is upon the man with the first set of relationships and the circumstances contrasted to the friend that sticks closer. Circumstantially, this ruin, this breaking into pieces, this loss, it could be caused directly based on those relationships such as a mooching entourage of people, it can be due to things completely outside one's control and kind of giving a picture of fair weather friends where as your circumstances go well, you have many companions, but as your circumstances don't go so well, you may have fewer companions. There are other Proverbs that speak to that dynamic as well.

But the turn of the second line sheds the light for our understanding in the first line. And that question, as I stated, of translation doesn't actually impact the overall meaning of the Proverb. As one scholar said it this way, "A man who sets himself to gain many friends comes finally to be a loser, for he squanders his means and is impoverished in the favor of others." So, it would be significant for us as well as the readers all through the life of God's people to be mindful and to be aware of those who you associate with.

Now, the word for "friend" in the second line, this is where the contrast hinges because it's a different word. Some translations in English might put "friends" in both lines which doesn't necessarily help you in realizing that those are two different words that are being pitted against each other. But here, the word for "friend" describes a more trusted and closer relationship. It actually carries a dynamic of love.

And this word is used all over scripture, and here's a few examples. In Deuteronomy 4, the word is employed to describe God's motivating relationship with the Israelites when He brought them out of Egypt. In Genesis 22, it's used to describe the relationship between Abraham and Isaac, the one whom he loved. In Isaiah 41, we see it being used to describe the relationship that Abraham had with God. It says that Abraham was a friend of God. It can be used to describe the love between a husband and a wife. But it captures, also, the deep intimacy within friendship that we see here in this Proverb. It's what captures the essence of the friendship between David and Jonathan. It ripples out throughout time of the life of the people of God. And we see this being embodied and lived out as we learn of the relationship between Jesus and His disciples. He loved them. He befriended them.

So, we see here that this friend, the friend who loves, sticks closer than even a brother. There is an attachment that is compared to the bond of a family member, although it may not be that family member.

Whether you are in the lunch room at school, the dormitory of college, the barracks of the base, the cubicles of the workplace, or the homes of our families, we have experienced these distinctions of the two types of relationships, these two types of companions. And those that enjoy the warmth of the sun tend to be those many companions. But when we face ruin, we experience those friends who also are with us when we're burning in the fire.

The wisdom of God invites us to seek this deep relationship with another, this trusted, loyal, lasting friendship. The exhortation and invitation of wisdom is for us to seek wise friends that embody wisdom themselves, to have this close attachment that we share not only in our fellowship and relationship with the Lord, but with one another where we are face to face, side by side walking in life together. Let us seek such friends so that they are with us in our successes and that they remain with us in our losses.

Secondly, to go from seeking, this ache that we have which is good, let's discuss practicing wise friendship. The very essence of a proverb is to do that, to go and glean understanding and insight and put it into practice in our lives. So, a couple things that I want to draw attention to about this. There's so much that could be said about this. And at this point, I would commend you the book by Drew Hunter *Made for Friendship*. It's a great little book of exploring the biblical categories of the friendship that we long for, the marks of friendship, and how to walk in such friendship. One of my favorite books is C. S. Lewis's *The Four Loves*, the essay on friendship. I would commend that to you as well.

But here, we see two pictures in the categories of friendship. The first picture of is of concentric circles. The outer ring of these circles comprises the most abundant number of our relationships. It's the relationships with the cashier. It's the relationships with the car that is either cutting you off or you are cutting the car off. It's just the daily interactions of impersonal relationships. We have them all the time.

As you move further into the concentric circles, you progressively go from impersonal to acquaintances to more casual friends that you might socialize with to the final inner circle of who is the closest, the tightest, the most connected circle of friends. Now, that circle is going to be fewer.

Part of the challenge of walking in wisdom is to kind of figure out, well, where do people fall on these concentric circles? Now, we can do that sinfully. We can have motivations of making sure the right people are in the right circle because we want to have them bolster us, our status, our esteem, similar to many of the dynamics in *The Great Gatsby*, even. But we can also do it in a way that actually gives health and flourishing to our relationships because there are healthy boundaries and healthy expectations where we experience intimacy at different levels of our relating.

The second picture that I would give you for your mind's eye is thinking about life as a multilane highway. And I'm not going to sing the song. But life is a highway. The further right of the lanes is the impersonal relationships, and that lane has back to back traffic. It's just bumper to bumper. As you move further into the middle lanes, that's your acquaintances and casual relationships. And then on the very

far left where you're driving your car, there's just a few people. And they may only just be in your car or a few additional cars in the lane.

Now, the beauty of friendship as well as the sadness of friendship, depending on the circumstance, is that those cars can merge in and out of lanes. And as we go through life, it's a great joy to think about and ponder that your best friend may not even be in the realm of your life right now. The best friend that you will enjoy life with side by side, deep intimacy, deep connection, you maybe have never met them yet.

And so, our cars can merge and go in and out of lanes. I'm coming up on my 20th high school reunion this year, and I'm already starting to reminisce. I'm going on Facebook to see old friends and pictures from high school and some pictures as they've started to age and have kids. It's fond memories from my time. But it's also with great sadness of seeing some of those friends that I was very close with who over time there was drifting. People come in and out of the lanes. And that kind of grief has a joyful sadness.

But there's also another kind of grief when it comes to other tragedies and calamities, when there's real loss. You may experience that sadness and that ache of friendship because who's in my lane, or who's in my concentric circles? And when you're younger, it might be more of an angst of, I want someone there with me, and I haven't found someone yet. No one's there. As you progress in life, it might change to where someone was there, but they're not anymore. And one is a loss and a pain of absence because it's not yet found. And the other is a pain and an absence of something that is no longer there.

But as we practice wise friendship, this becomes the daily rhythms and the weekly rhythms of our lives together. And it's important to remember that people that merge in and out of our lives are also image bearers made in the image of God who very likely have the same aches and longings that you do and you have for that deep intimacy, finding it face to face, side by side.

So, I have just a couple of very broad suggestions. And I'm leaving them broad on purpose for you to think about how they can play out in your lives. Some of these things are certainly as they come. Some of them can be planned with intentionality. But just a couple things that I'd like to list as ways of practicing this kind of wise friendship.

Celebrate. Celebrate together. Celebrate for your friends. Celebrate with your friends. Such examples of milestones in life and accomplishments that come throughout different phases of our lives. This is where we're rejoicing in others' rejoicing. As we celebrate, it connects to so many other areas. It connects with how that's further cultivating and building up my love for my friend and my friend's love for me. And in celebrating, we're also practicing hospitality. We're recognizing that there's always room because of love. There's always room for one more. And it might adjust your relationship a little bit.

But there's friendship, as C. S. Lewis says in his essay, "Friendship is one of multiplication and division, not addition and subtraction." And what he means by that is I am with my friend, and I'm enjoying life and we have our interests. So, when you find that person with that same interest, it's multiplied. Now, it's an addition of one. But then that person knows someone who also has that interest. But then all of a sudden, with addition comes multiplication because what I enjoy of you is then further brought out by another person that's with us.

Same way with division. When someone leaves, moves, passes away, it's no longer, now that that person's gone, then I have more of this other friend. No. It's actually, I have less because of what this person brought out of you is what contributed to my joy. And now that my friend is gone, there's a fading of that piece. So, it's friendship of multiplication and division.

And so, as we celebrate, we practice hospitality and we experience the joys of our life, the doubling of our joys. Another thing that we can practice is to grieve together for our friends, with our friends, to grieve our broken relationships, to grieve loss, to grieve death, to grieve the calamities that come our

way, to grieve the failures that we make, the choices that we make. This is the weeping with those who weep in the context of friendship.

Another practice for us in friendship is to enrich each other's lives. This is the mutuality of friendship. It's the one anothering that we would honor one another with our speech, that we would esteem one another with trusted loyalty, that we would encourage one another with our support and consistency, giving life to one another.

And as we celebrate, as we grieve, as we enrich each other's lives, we are living a life of wisdom that we're both appropriating but as we then mirror to each other and live that out for each other's benefit.

Lastly, we'll look at receiving. Receive wise friendship. And this is completely rooted in two things. One, a lot of what we've spoken about this morning is us looking for that friend, for us to have a longing that we want met, to experience that closeness and intimacy with another person. We long to have that friend. But where this comes from is rooted in being that friend.

So, look at again at verse 24. "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." You can read this in a time of need of what you need a friend to be. But there is wisdom in being transformed and meditating and practicing and shaping and trying and failing and trying again that you would be a friend that sticks closer than a brother, that you would be that person that is needed in their life.

And to do that has to be first and foremost received because of our friendship with God. Jesus is a friend of sinners. The gospels portray Him as a friend of tax collectors, people who were known to extort friends and neighbors, perhaps even family members. Tax collectors were not looked upon highly. Likewise, Jesus was accused of being friends of drunks.

Just picture those scenarios. He was being in places where He would be accused of associating with people like that. And His reputation was of being friends of sinners.

We see from John, both in his gospels and in his letter, we see this friendship come out in the life of Jesus's years spent with His disciples. He walked with them, ate with them, laughed with them, cried with them, taught to the crowds but then explained to His disciples, He encouraged them to go and do something in His name, and celebrated with them, grieved over Lazarus. This friendship is to enrich each other's lives of the very nature of the relationship of Jesus as the disciple-maker, calling these men to walk with Him, to follow in His ways, and to understand the mysteries of the kingdom for a greater purpose. But as they did this, we see the consistency of Christ's character embedded in that nature or the part of the word to love. Love is Jesus's motivation.

We see in 1 John that John says that we can love because Jesus loved us first. I don't know if that's in your experience, but it's very palatable to my experience of working with people who out of their fears, out of their anxieties, feeling unsafe in their homes, unsafe in their neighborhoods, what is natural for the human being in isolation and loneliness is to crash into each other. We want connection, but we are afraid of each other, and we steal from each other, and we self-protect. We want to take. We want to transact from the relationship. But when you have had a friend who has shown you that being a constant faithful friend further gives definition to what that means. It gives further encouragement for us to walk in that as well.

The last thing I would say with receiving friendship is again that piece that's related to the quote from Tim Keller, but to think about that in both the garden of creation and in the garden of new creation, our joys are complete in paradise with friends, and to think about how our joy is made complete. Again, John is learning this from Jesus that you would share and have my joy be complete being in friendship. This is the ultimate friendship. And ultimately, we can look to this Proverb with great hope and great encouragement because Jesus is that friend that sticks closer to any other, that sticks closer than a brother.

Jay Gatsby had many companions that enjoyed the pleasures of his prosperity but abandoned him in his ruin. But there is another tale that tells a different story of friendship from *The Fellowship of the Ring*. "It would be the death of you to come with me, Sam," said Frodo. "And I could not have borne that." "Not as certain as being left behind," said Sam. "But I'm going to Mordor," said Frodo. "I know that well enough Mr. Frodo, of course you are. And I'm coming with you," said Sam. We would all be so lucky to have one friend in our lives such as Samwise Gamgee.

And so, whether our circumstances bring great joy or great sorrow, wise friends stick close out of love. And such friends half our sorrows and double our joys. May we seek wise friends because it is good. May we practice deep friendship with one another because it is life giving. And let's receive the friendship that points us to Jesus Christ. The very friendship that we receive from Him, but one that is completed in our joy with Him and one another. And He, above all, is the wise one who never leaves us and never forsakes us. He's the one that sticks closer than a brother. Let's pray.

Our Father God, we thank you. And we celebrate that this joy is complete by your very life. And you invite us to share in it. And you take us from being enemies, and you make us your friend. You move us from the external far lanes of life, and you bring us close. You bring us near. May we receive that great joy. May we receive that glorious grace. And may we then also be ones who extend it to others. We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.