

Proverbs | The Spirit of Wisdom for Daily Life

Friendship

Proverbs 6.16-19; 17.17-18; 18.24; 25.17, 20; 26.18-19; 27.5, 6, 9, 14, 17; 28.23; 29.5; Ecclesiastes 4.9-12
8.19.18

Proverbs 6.12-19 *There are six things which the LORD hates, Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: ¹⁷ Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, And hands that shed innocent blood, ¹⁸ A heart that devises wicked plans, Feet that run rapidly to evil, ¹⁹ A false witness who utters lies, And one who spreads strife among brothers.*

17.17-18 *A friend loves at all times, And a brother is born for adversity. A man lacking in sense pledges And becomes guarantor in the presence of his neighbor.*

18.24 *A man of too many friends comes to ruin, But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.*

25.17-20 *Let your foot rarely be in your neighbor's house, Or he will become weary of you and hate you... ²⁰ Like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar on soda, Is he who sings songs to a troubled heart.*

26.18-19 *Like a madman who throws Firebrands, arrows and death, ¹⁹ So is the man who deceives his neighbor, And says, "Was I not joking?"*

27.5-17 *Better is open rebuke Than love that is concealed. ⁶ Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy... ⁹ Oil and perfume make the heart glad, So a man's counsel is sweet to his friend...¹⁴ He who blesses his friend with a loud voice early in the morning, It will be reckoned a curse to him...¹⁷ Iron sharpens iron, So one man sharpens another.*

28.23 *He who rebukes a man will afterward find more favor Than he who flatters with the tongue.*

29.5 *A man who flatters his neighbor Is spreading a net for his steps.*

Ecclesiastes 4.7-12 *Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. ¹⁰ For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. ¹¹ Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? ¹² And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.*

Today is the final sermon in this series on Proverbs. I started off asking you to pray for me (a little intimidating) and you DID...several people told me that and I think the series was helpful ... it has been for ME.

And in this study of WISDOM... all the topics have had a relational aspect, i.e. words/speech, envy, decision making (last week we saw – we get counsel IN relationship) but TODAY we tackle the topic of relationships head-on as we close the series with this teaching on friendship... AND it sort of builds on the last few sermons (our speech/words, envy, guidance) ... so keep it all in mind if you're able.

Let's look at friendship and the spiritual life:

1) Friendship Considered

2) Friendship Illuminated

Friendship Considered: let's look at friendship in the Proverbs and consider three truths about it.

Friendship is 1) Optional 2) Indispensable 3) Corruptible

1st - Optional The book by C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, has the best little exploration of friendship that I've ever read. He compares four words used in Greek ancient literature for love. The word for friendship is "philia" as in "Philadelphia" (love of brothers/friends) and Lewis says that "Eros" (erotic/romantic love) and "Storgé" (affection or parental love) both have a parallel in the animal kingdom.

Animals reproduce... like Eros and animals care for their young...a kind of affection (at least protect). So... these loves, erotic love and affection are necessary to the propagation of our species. They're not optional... But friendship is (in this way) optional.

Modern people don't NEED friends... it's considered a healthy thing... after a wife and kids a man needs a few friends... but when we say "need" friends we mean...like a business suit...you know every man should have a suit and every woman should have some sort of formal dress/outfit...just in case.

It wasn't this way for the ancients. They saw this love as the highest love...the most spiritual kind of love BECAUSE it's not an animal necessity...like reproduction and raising our young... For the ancients, FRIENDSHIP is where we really show our humanity and we love NOT because it's a biological requirement.

I've mentioned the loneliness epidemic in the U.K. and how in January they established a new cabinet post, "Minister of Loneliness"... And the U.S. has the same problem...because we can technically survive without friends, it doesn't mean we can THRIVE without them...and there's a lot of literature showing that we're pulling away from each other (*Habits of the Heart* by Robert Bellah [1985] and *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam [2000]).

And Lewis points out that friendship is optional because friendship is always ABOUT something... You basically ask another person, "Do you see the same truth that I see?" and the other person says "yes!"... Maybe your standing in line at a store or restaurant and the person in front of you is wearing a sports-team logo...so you say, "Hey, go Red Sox!"

And maybe it turns out that you're both super-fans and soon you're going to a game and the friendship is about the Boston Red Sox.

Or you're at a doctor's appointment, in the waiting room and notice the person sitting next to you is writing with a very fine fountain pen...You start to talk ...she invites you to the local fountain-pen club...

You share political views. You homeschool your kids. You're reading a Charles Dickens novel on a plane and so is the person next to you...you both stop reading and start talking and a friendship is born. You went to elementary school together...and you both see the same truth.

Lewis says Eros has the two lovers facing each other but philia/friendship means you walk NEXT to each other...NOT really focused on the OTHER but on the thing you both see.

The prophet Amos wrote: "Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?" (Amos 3.3 NIV) So friendship is optional in this sense too – it requires a kind of commonality and agreement.

2nd Consideration about friendship: it's Indispensible.

And you might think, "well how can it be BOTH optional AND Indispensible" – Well, it's optional in the sense that we have to choose it...and in that a lot of people DON'T (thus the loneliness epidemic!) but it's INDESPENSIBLE for anyone who is going to thrive.

If you're going to flourish as a human being – especially spiritually – friendship is NOT an option, it's required. That's why that last reading from the other wisdom book, Ecclesiastes, puts it so bluntly. The writer, Solomon, was bummed out by life "under the sun"...that we ARE not in heaven and things often look crazy and absurd. He saw a man working like crazy...insane hours...stressed out and then Solomon noticed this guy had no family, no children, no friends and Solomon wondered: "Who is going to get all this man's wealth when he dies?" And he arrives at a conclusion: "Life is often absurd – BUT – we can mitigate/lessen the absurdity by walking through life with friends...we NEED companions... "Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor."

In work, in a long journey, when it gets cold or dangerous, when you're facing an assailant... YOU can't do it alone! You need friends.

And it's seen in the first reading too. It's one of many "numerical Proverbs" and the way it works is that a series is presented but the focus is on the LAST unit: "seven things the LORD hates...and the SEVENTH is the very worst: one who spreads strife among brothers." AND it's all about how much the God of the Bible values relationship/friendship. He made us so that we cannot thrive without it and if you sully/pollute it by spreading rumors, slander and gossip you threaten the very image of God in us...

So, we NEED friendship, brotherhood, real relationship with other real people. And this thread runs all the way from Genesis, "It is not good for man to be alone..." right into the New Testament where these "one-another" mandates are on virtually every page, "teach one another...forgive one another...love one another... share with ..." etc.

We can get by in solitude...we can perhaps survive with very little human interaction...but to live a full and rich life, to THRIVE spiritually requires friends.

3rd – Friendship is optional, indispensable and last, it's corruptible. What happens is that when we choose a friend – we also choose to exclude "THEM".

That's what friendship is – a choice to include and exclude. If two friends are engrossed in conversation about fountain pens and a third person tries to join the conversation but cares NOTHING about that topic... and says, "Yeah...I had one of those dumb things once...ink leaked all over my hands...stupid!"

Well, the third person doesn't see the same truth the others do and he's out of the conversation because it's the TOPIC that binds them together. So the only way to include him is to change the subject.

And even though this IS the nature of friendship – it can very easily devolve into PRIDE... As the third person walks away the other two may roll their eyes and say something snaky like, "Cretan! Probably has one of those cheap ball-points that always clog!"

The thing they have in common CAN become the ALL-IMPORTANT test of a person's worth... and a source of pride.

And this is why we need...in friendship...LIGHT: the illumination of friendship.

We have a little fishpond in our back yard. The water circulates through a chamber that has a super-strong UV light in it that kills the algae so the water stays clear (some people use this for their pools) and that's really what the Gospel does to friendships.

When what binds us together is the truth that God came into the world in the Person of Jesus Christ, when that's the "truth we both see" THEN we cannot become prideful/arrogant and exclusive; unless we forget the very basis for our friendship.

We both believe that WE are guilty of treason against God...all those seven things in that first reading – the things God hates – WE HAVE DONE.

We believe that we had an outstanding debt before God we could NEVER have repaid... but that God came to pay that debt FOR us...That Jesus Christ lived the life WE FAILED TO LIVE and then

DIED THAT DEATH WE DESERVED TO DIE... He took the blame and was punished in my place...“ruined sinners to reclaim”.

And what WE did to GET the benefits of Jesus Christ’s work was... nothing!

The Sovereign God sent His Spirit to open our eyes to our own utter helplessness and guilt AND to the reality that God had answered the demands of His own Law FOR us... The Spirit gave us eyes to see and faith to believe... I can only say, “Thank You, Lord!”

I was an enemy... and now I am a “friend of God”... Jesus Christ told His disciples, “Now I call you My friends!” and that title has been applied to me NOT because I’m better than anyone...but as a gift/grace. Before I acted friendly toward God – HE called me “friend”.

That’s the light that burns the algae of pride and self-righteousness out of our friendships... BUT WAIT: there’s more. We also see that what C.S. Lewis calls a “secret Master of Ceremonies” has brought us together... We didn’t choose God – He chose us (there CAN’T be any pride here!) AND He also chose YOU for ME and ME for YOU.

I didn’t really choose my friends – the Master of Ceremonies did. Why was I in that waiting room at just the moment YOU were?

Do you ever think that we didn’t CHOOSE one another but that God arranged every detail of our lives to bring us together? You were transferred to South Florida... you met someone in the grocery store (and why were you there JUST at that moment?) and what would have happened if you had made other decisions? (Remember last week?) And without our even knowing it, the “Master of Ceremonies” was bringing us together...so that today, we are IN IT TOGETHER... journeying as friends.

And this means I MUST really value you – God chose us to be together – You only get so many people with whom you journey through life (“A man of too many friends comes to ruin!” – I’d rather have a small cadre of true friends than a million fans who don’t really know me)... And to think that THE Friend who sticks closer than a brother, Jesus Christ, the friend of sinners brought us together to share this journey that lasts but a short time. “Hallelujah, What a Savior!” He’s the Third Strand who binds us together.

With this illumined friendship – as the Gospel keeps us seeing our deep flaws AND our rock-solid security in the nail-scarred hands of the Lover of our souls ...as this UV light keeps burning away our pride, it also MOVES us to really value one another. God has brought us together at this moment and in this place.

When I’m believing the Gospel as THE Truth that brought us together... it makes me want to learn how to love YOU, my friends, to love you well.

The focus of so many of these verses is on APT communication – speaking words that show how I value YOU AND value the One who brought us together... it inspires relational hygiene!

I'm learning to recognize what my friend needs and say words that actually address the need. I don't barge in with loud words too early in the morning. When my friend is down I don't come with trite little clichés and syrupy songs: "Like one who takes off a coat on a cold day, or like vinegar on baking-soda, is he who sings songs to a troubled heart."

See it's all about speaking apt words, words sometimes difficult to say because I truly value this friendship and I value the One who chose us to be friends... I will not just flatter you to make you like me because that kind of falsehood does not value this sacred friendship...

I am learning to LISTEN to you ...so I can respond to what's really happening... offering counsel when it's really wanted... And I'm trying to let you sharpen me, like iron sharpens iron BECAUSE, I believe we have the same Savior, the same Father, the same Spirit who orchestrated our togetherness.

Maybe...you have not yet believed in this Savior and have not yet been called His friend and ours... I want to invite you today: have you seen how He brought you here?...And do you sense that He wants to include you and that WE want to welcome you? Call out to Him now...Trust Him.