

Ancient Wisdom on Friendship

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Date: 10 February 2019

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- [0 : 0 0] Our first proverb here is in chapter 3 and verse 27 and 28, and it's to do with practicing kindness.
- So let me read that for you. Do not withhold good from those who deserve it when it's in your power to act. Do not say to your neighbor, come back later, I'll give it tomorrow when you now have it with you.
- Okay, so very simple in a sense, very challenging in another sense, but he's basically saying when it's in your power to help someone, when somebody needs help, our responsibility is to do good and to do it now, not later.
- So this teaches us something about friendship. A wise friend is somebody who is attentive to the needs of others. We're looking around, we're seeing who needs help, and we're willing to help even when it might not be convenient for us.
- And we'll think about the challenge of that in a moment. He says, do not withhold good from those who deserve it. What is that good? What is that kindness that Solomon is talking about? We don't know.
- [1 : 0 8] In a sense, he's deliberately left it, not specified, so that we don't put limits on it. So it might be somebody comes to us and they need some equipment, or they need some expertise that we have to offer.
- It may be that somebody comes to us and it's as simple as they need some food or some financial resources, or maybe they need our time. They have something on their mind, something on their heart, and they need somebody to give them time to chat with them.
- So it's a simple but a challenging proverb. And I invite you to reflect later on what this might look like in our day-to-day lives.
- You know, it might look like, boys and girls, it might look as simple as, you'll have heard this in your house once or twice, I'm quite sure, when your mom and dad say, tidy your room.
- The kind thing to do is to do it now, not later, when it suits you, which is usually never. So sometimes the kind thing is really simple, but it's really hard.
- [2 : 2 0] It might look like helping your brother or your sister or a friend at school, even when you're in the middle of a game or you're in the middle of watching the telly, and there's something you might rather do.
- The kind thing is to go and help them. For us all, we probably have a list of good intentions, things that I know need doing in my house or in my flat, that would be a blessing to somebody else.
- Proverbs is saying, we'll do that thing and do it today, not tomorrow. It might be as simple as slowing down to really ask someone, how are you today?
- Not just as a, you know, the way that we greet one another in our culture, but to really stop and ask and find out what's on a person's horn.

Or it might be much more creative than that. I read an article from a Christian mom this week, talking about what she does in her local community when the message goes out that there's a missing dog.

[3 : 26] They live apparently in a dog walking area, lots of dogs around, and they have something on social media that allows people to give information if there are missing dogs in the area.

So this Christian mom, what she does when she gets this message, she calls whatever kids are in the house together, and they pray for the dog, and they pray for the concerned owners, and then they go out on the streets, looking to find A, the dog, or B, the owner, in order to bring the two together.

And she talked about this as being a really important way for her and her kids to be involved in neighborhood mission. That's a really simple way to show kindness and to be a good neighbor.

And that's a really nice story. But back to the challenge of this. Do not say to your neighbor, come back later, I'll give it tomorrow. There's the challenge for us to do the good thing today and not tomorrow.

To do it now rather than later. Because most of us, I imagine, feel ourselves to be time poor. We have schedules.

[4 : 32] We have to-do lists that drive our days. And so often we don't have much in the way of margins. We're moving from this activity to this meeting, to this deadline, to this pickup, and it seems like there's very little margin.

So then we have very little space and time, perhaps, to stop and to help. And so maybe that's one of the challenges for us, is to think about how can we build in margins.

I remember reading about a missionary who knew his work from his house to the shops to the school would take, let's say, 40 minutes. So he decided to add an extra 10 minutes time so then he'd be able to stop and have a conversation.

He'd be able to stop and help someone. Maybe that's something that we might usefully think about. So the challenge sometimes is that we feel time poor. Sometimes it's just that we feel lazy or we feel selfish.

We'd actually rather not do it today because we'd rather not do it at all. We might feel that we have had a busy day. We've got demands that need to be met rather than trying to help somebody else.

[5 : 44] Now, as we think about the challenge of this proverb, how can Jesus help? Let's think for a moment about the example of Jesus.

On a Wednesday lunchtime, we have a Bible study through in the hall. And on Wednesday, we were thinking about the feeding of the 5,000, a miracle that maybe many of us have heard about.

Now, the situation behind that is Jesus is taking his disciples away to find rest. They've been so busy, they don't even have time to eat. So there's Jesus and his disciples.

They're tired, they're hungry, they're super busy. They go away to be on their own. But as they move to that quiet place, this huge crowd comes to them. And what happens is Jesus has compassion on them.

He looks at them as sheep without a shepherd. And so he teaches them and brings them the word of God. And then he feeds them. Jesus is somebody who made time for others.

[6 : 46] You read the gospels, you will see him stopping to pay attention to the needs of people. And it's there in his teaching, it's why we read the story of the Good Samaritan.

Jesus is teaching what does it look like to be a neighbor? It looks like helping. It looks like showing mercy to those in need when we find people in need, whoever they are, whether they're friend or enemy or who knows who they are.

And of course, that brings us to the gospel ultimately. The way that we are able to practice true kindness as a friend is to have first received the kindness of God from Jesus who came to be the great Samaritan.

Jesus who came to us in our need, in our misery because of our sin and our unbelief and our inability to know God, to enjoy God, which is what we're made for.

Jesus comes to us. And by his death on the cross, he washes us, he cleans us, he transforms us, he gives us new life and gives us peace with God.

[8 : 02] And so as we receive that kind of love, that kind of kindness, as we reflect on that in our own lives, then let's let that generous love then inform our practice of this kind of kindness.

So Solomon says, practice kindness. Our next proverb is, forward a few pages, chapter 13. This is page 647. This isn't so much about something to practice as some people to pursue.

Page 647, Proverbs chapter 13, verse 20. Pursue wise friends. He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm.

So the Bible has a lot to say about wisdom and folly, to be wise and to be foolish. And we need to understand that that's not an intellectual thing. It's not saying find yourself some friends who are super smart.

Wisdom and folly is all about how does a person live in reference to God and his values? Is a person looking to love and serve and obey God or are they deliberately trying to ignore God in the world that he made?

[9 : 25] That's what differentiates, separates wisdom from folly. And so Solomon gives this advice to his son because he knows that for better or for worse, we become more and more like the people who we spend time with.

The people that we admire, we tend to become more like them. We discover that the closer our friendship, the more those friendships shape our character.

Whether it's by a friend's example or whether it's their advice or whether it's the direction of their life, for better or for worse, the people that we are close to, that they have an influence on us.

We can sometimes see that at a really surface level. Spend time with somebody. You might begin to take up some of their mannerisms. Some of their phrases become your phrases.

But at a deeper level, we can adopt a person's cynical or judgmental attitude negatively or positively, become more generous and more gracious as we spend time with that kind of a person.

[10 : 31] So Solomon is reminding his son that ultimately, he says this throughout the Proverbs, the goal of life and wisdom is all about knowing God.

Knowing and enjoying friendship with God is what it means to be wise. Therefore, choose friends and choose role models who help you to get closer to Jesus.

Pursue those friendships that help you to walk with God. What does that look like in our lives? Well, maybe the children's game, Simon Says, is helpful.

Boys and girls, I'm sure you know the game, Simon Says. Simon Says, touch your head. You touch your head. If you just say to someone, touch your head, and Simon hasn't said it, you're not supposed to copy. We have to be really careful, whatever age we are, about the friendships that we have to see whether they're being a positive or a negative influence on us.

Sometimes the role models that we choose are really good, but sometimes they're really not. And ultimately, we're all called, if we want to be truly wise, to choose Jesus as our role model.

[11 : 51] To make him the one that we want to live according to. But for all of us, it's good wisdom to watch and learn from godly examples.

It's often wisdom and guidance given out when people are about to get married. Find a marriage of a mature couple that you admire and get close to them.

Watch them. Learn from them so that you might seek to put that into practice. In your field of expertise or interest, find another Christian who has walked that path before you and ask them questions.

How can I be faithful in this field of industry? How can I be faithful on the sports field? We need to ask ourselves the question, which friends most shape the way we look at the world?

Who has the big influence on us? Our friendships are not neutral. And one of the things about the gift of the church to the people of God is that we have an opportunity within church to pursue friendships that help us together to follow after God.

[13 : 03] And again, when we think about Jesus, Jesus taught quite clearly on this. You know, he would say on the one hand, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

So he calls people to listen to him, to understand that he is the one who brings wisdom for how to know God. But he'd also say, watch out for those blind guides, those false teachers who can easily lead you astray.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, he told the parable of the wise and the foolish builder. He said that to listen and to practice, to put into his, into practice his words is to be wise, is to build your house on a rock that stands.

Building a life on friendship with Jesus is a solid foundation. Whereas if we ignore Jesus and his words, it's like a house built on sand.

So we are called to pursue wise friends. We're called to pursue Jesus. Jesus, the one who came to bring us back to God. The one who prayed shortly before the cross, this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom you sent.

[14 : 19] To know Jesus is to know eternal life, which is to know God, Father, Son, and Spirit. It's to know eternal love and eternal joy.

Jesus invites us into that. Therefore, we are invited to pursue him. And then the last proverb from King Solomon, from chapter 17, and verse 9.

So this time we're on page 652. Solomon's wisdom to his son, and by extension his wisdom to us, is to practice forgiveness.

chapter 17 and verse 9. He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.

So this proverb is giving the wisdom that love covers, love forgives, a multitude of sins and failures.

[15 : 30] That often wisdom in friendship is being silent rather than sharing the faults of a friend, especially if we're tempted to share those faults with others, rather than gently talking to the person who's been guilty of wrong.

It was Martin Luther King, the civil rights leader, who said that love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.

And when we think about that saying, when we think about this wisdom of Solomon, we understand that to forgive is a gift of love that can reconcile rather than drive away.

They're not constantly going on about past failures. It is a way to remove that barrier to allow friendship and love to develop. And this is the heart of the gospel, that God in his grace has chosen through the blood of Jesus to cover over our offense, to remember it no more.

Solomon is saying love that offers forgiveness and that offers the discretion that doesn't talk and gossip fosters friendship and love.

[16 : 53] When we think about the opposite, it's about being quick to be offended, it's being quick to retaliate, quick to lash out. We're reminded that love chooses to think the best of others, to see the best in others.

So we're called to be quick to reconcile. We are called to avoid passing on the faults of others even when we sometimes dress that up as a prayer request.

Pray this for my friend because he has been so and then comes the big list that's ultimately not the other person's business and sometimes we can dress up gossip really nicely.

It looks like making the first move to reconcile with someone else because we understand that God has made the first move towards us so that we might be reconciled to him.

It's challenging. Our instinct is perhaps to say but they did that thing to me and that was awful. Our temptation perhaps is to lash out.

[18 : 14] Our instinct is perhaps to lash out and it maybe feels good in the moment we lose sight of the consequences. It can be extremely hard to cover over an offense to seek to forgive and to not repeat a matter.

How again can Jesus help us in this? Perhaps you are familiar with the parable called the parable of the unmerciful servant.

Jesus told this story about a king who wanted to call in the debts of those who had amassed debt with him and he brings in one servant who has a huge debt.

We take hundreds of years to pay off the debt and the servant falls at the king's feet and begs for mercy and the king shows mercy and cancels the debt in an act of great grace and forgiveness.

Well that servant then goes out and just a little while later he sees a fellow servant who owes him just a very small amount of money but there is no mercy and forgiveness.

[19 : 24] He grabs him, he shakes him, he throws him in prison until the last penny can be paid back. Well the king is furious. He is furious that he has shown mercy to that servant but that servant has not passed it forward and Jesus used that story to teach his followers that just as we have received huge mercy from God.

So we should be quick to show forgiveness to the relatively small things that others do to us. That God's forgiveness, God's mercy should change our heart, should bring a transforming work that then allows us to pay that forward to practice forgiveness.

And this is the gospel. In the book of Colossians Paul uses the image of the cross. He says that Jesus came and he cancelled the written code that stood against us.

So this record of wrongs that God has because of our sin and our guilt, we have this record of debt before God. Now when the Roman Empire was crucifying a victim, they would nail the victim to the cross and then above their head would be the list of crimes.

This person is dying for such and such. What Paul is giving us this picture of is that there on the cross, Jesus is dying with our list of crimes hanging above his head.

[21 : 04] Jesus comes to be our substitute. He takes our record of wrong, he takes our guilt, and he pays the price in full so that we might go free.

The Bible says that God deliberately by his grace and love and mercy doesn't remember our sin when it is forgiven. It is thrown to the bottom of the ocean of his forgetfulness.

It is as far from him as the east is from the west. And so the good news of Jesus is that we have received great forgiveness and great mercy from God.

And therefore, the more that we know of that, we reflect on that, that can fuel our forgiveness towards our friends.

So we come to the end of our series on friendship, and we've seen all the way as we go that Jesus is presented in the Bible as the greatest of friends. Augustine in the fourth century, he said, friendship with one another and with God is the supreme pleasure of life.

[22 : 20] Now, if that's true, and I think it is, how do you and I enjoy them both? How do we enjoy good friendships with one another and with God?

And how do we protect them both? Well, the Bible says it begins by trusting in Jesus. It begins by becoming a friend of Jesus, and the more we know and enjoy being with him, the more we will know and enjoy all our friendships.

Maybe think of Beauty and the Beast, a classic Disney movie, probably my favorite Disney movie, I think. When we meet the beast at first, he's very skinny, angry, he's very antisocial, and because he's been so used to living alone, he's become all shriveled up and just mean.

But once Belle is introduced to his life, once he meets Belle, once he discovers the kindness and love of Belle, we discover that the beast's character begins to change.

He becomes soft and gentle and lovely. As friendship and love starts to melt his hard heart. When we know the friendship of Jesus for ourselves, when we come to experience his kindness, when we come to appreciate his forgiveness and his love for us, then in exactly the same way, our hard hearts too begin to melt.

[24 : 00] Jesus begins to work out the rough edges in our lives so that we are able to enjoy the wonder of friendship with God, and we're able to be better friends to others.
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