

Neighbours and Friends

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 0 0] might want to turn up to Proverbs 27 on page 548. We are in the series in the book of Proverbs which is about wisdom, how to live a wise life and how to walk the path of life, the path of wisdom and it's more than morality, it's more than avoiding bad and being good, it has to do with your heart and our character, what we love and trust and the title of the sermon today I called neighbours and friends but we don't have time to deal with both of them, I'm sorry, so we're just going to deal with friends because friendship is very important and friendship is in trouble and the thing about Proverbs, you'll know this by now, that it doesn't deal with friendship by taking one chapter and saying here are 25 rules about being good friends and keeping good friends, it's like friendship, it weaves itself in and out of all the other pieces of our life, sometimes in the strangest places and Proverbs says friendship's so powerful you won't make it without good friends on the path of life and we're going to be mostly in chapter 27 but listen to this, Proverbs 13.20 says, whoever walks with the wise, walks with the wise, becomes wise but the companion of fools suffer harm, that's a fact, that's the way God's made us, so the friends you make and the friends you choose have this tremendous power and influence over us that we don't often see for evil and for good, we're shaped by our friends in all kinds of ways either towards wisdom or towards foolishness, friendship is, can be a school for virtue or a school for vice, so choose your friends carefully and the primary picture of the wise life you remember in Proverbs is walking the path of life, so here in this verse you walk with wise people, the walking is also a

Hebrew phrase for friendship, it's an image of friendship and there are many people who have walked away from God because of the influence of their friends and how many of us have been kept in the path of life because of the blessing of good friends, I certainly have, the proverb says you're not going to make it without good friends, we need good friends to keep us on the path and we need to be good friends to others to keep their feet on the path as well but although this is a key part of human flourishing and the good life, friendship is under pressure, friendship has fallen on hard times in our culture, our highly sexualised context makes it very tricky to have friendships across sex, from Disney to Dartmouth College, the exaltation of romance and sentimentality and sexuality makes it very tricky to navigate friendships and some people I know say it's just easier not to try.

The Vancouver Foundation a couple of years ago published a report, I've said this before, that for those who are 25 to 40 who live in Vancouver, this is the loneliest, most disconnected city in North America and it has become now quite trendy to blame all our ills on social media.

So last year the Professor of Evolutionary Psychology at Oxford published a report on friendships, the correlation of true friendships and the use of Facebook and the conclusion he came to after studying the users were that Facebook friends are almost entirely fake.

I'm not sure exactly what that means but he went on to say that your Facebook friends don't really sympathise with your problems and you can't depend on them and you build up this huge number of friends on Facebook and it tricks you into thinking you've got friends you don't really have.

[4 : 0 3] The correlation with true friendship is low. Although, I think there is a Christian way of subverting that and when anyone friends you on Facebook you just pray for them.

I'm not on Facebook, so... Sean Parker, who was the former president of Facebook, this week said, social media, and I quote, is exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology.

It might be putting our children's mental health at risk. It's not designed to make you wiser, better educated or healthier. Roger McNamee, who made a fortune, he was one of the early investors in Facebook, said that these major sites, Facebook and Google and others, have, I quote, substituted phony relationships for real relationships.

And he compares the power of social networking and the methods used to those of the Nazi propaganda chief, Joseph Goebbels. Quote, we're all to one degree or another addicted.

Methods are the same that they use in casinos. Now, I don't know whether what they're saying is true or not, but clearly friendship is in trouble and therefore it's good for us to turn to Proverbs.

[5 : 19] And I just want to ask three questions. Now, what is true friendship? How does it work? Where does it come from? Firstly, what is true friendship?

Now, as we skim through Proverbs, you'll see that Proverbs has an incredibly positive view of friendship and it says friendship is a form of love. So if you turn back to chapter 17 for a moment, 17, 17.

17. A friend loves at all times, but a brother is born for adversity.

Should be but. Friendship is a unique form of love that's even better than family ties. Your family is there for you in adversity for a while until they get sick of you.

But friends love at all times. The love of a friend brings something unique. It brings something the family cannot because you don't get to choose your family, but you do get to choose your friends and they get to choose you.

[6 : 29] And your family may love you in the family way, but the true friend sees you as you, irrespective of your worth or background or education or relatives or income.

Friendship is not charity. And in his book on the four loves, C.S. Lewis writes at length about friendship. And he points out that erotic love is biologically necessary for us to survive as a human species, that family love is necessary for us so that we won't kill each other, but there's absolutely zero biological necessary for the love of friendship.

Allies, perhaps, but not friendships. And I quote, And he says, The way friendship happens, begins, what friendship is, is when you find someone and you both say, What?

You two? I thought I was the only one. He says it's a kind of a discovery of someone who shares the same vision on something.

He says, I quote, We picture lovers face to face, but friends side to side, their eyes looking ahead. And that is why those pathetic people who simply want friends can never make any.

[8 : 09] The very condition of having friends is that we should want something besides friends. I think that's very clever. A true friendship, well, it might be useful to us, but it's useful by accident.

Because true friendship is based on something independent of our usefulness to that person. But as our lives get busier and more focused on our own fulfilment and identity and individual choices, someone has found a perfect solution for North American busyness.

It is a website called Rent-A-Friend. Really. And I know people who've used it. And it says this, Rent-A-Friend has friends from around the world available for hire.

Rent-A-Friend to attend a social event, a wedding or a party with you. Hire someone to introduce you to new people or someone to go to a movie or a restaurant with. Hire a friend to show you around a new town, teach you a new hobby or skill, or just someone for companionship.

I've got the website here, should anyone want to see me afterwards. But you see, paying for friendship is not what friendship is about.

[9 : 25] It's not an exchange of commodities where we're trading one thing for another. Even if friends are fabulously useful to you, as I say, they're only useful to you by accident.

The heart of true friendship is a mutual respect, turned away from each other, where you each stand as yourself and nobody else. And that gives to friendship a unique sweetness and quality.

So turn back to chapter 27, please. To this lovely verse, verse 9. Oil and perfume, 27.9, make the heart glad.

And the sweetness of a friend comes from his or her earnest counsel. There's this lovely gratuitous gladness of heart here. Olive oil, yeah, it's useful, all sorts of things, but it's also shiny and perfume.

That's for the senses, but it doesn't have a lot of practical use. And the gladness a friend brings comes from the earnest counsel. This is passionate secrets, listening, sharing in a unique way.

[10 : 40] And there is a sweetness that the proverb compares to the sweetness of honey. Not white sugar, which is bad for you, but a natural, delicious honey. Because true friendship is one of the great gifts of God, and it's a gift of God that we can give to others.

Without it, we're much the poorer. And the experts tell us we can only have between one and five close friends. And Proverbs concurs.

In chapter 18, 24, we read, A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. You don't have to be close friends with everyone you meet.

You don't have to be close friends with everyone at church. You don't have to be close friends with everyone in your pew. I know we feel guilty about all these things. It's possible to have many, many acquaintances, many companions, many casual friends, even associates who you come to know through interests or work.

And some of those associates, I think, can become close friends, and that often happens in Christian ministry. Very natural. But good friend, a good friend, sticks closer than a brother.

[11 : 54] I heard this week the motivational speaker Jim Rohn say that you are the average of the five people you most associate with. I don't know whether that's true or not, but if it's true, I'm doing okay.

So Proverbs keeps this distinction between companions and brothers on the one side and real friends on the other because your real friend sticks close to you.

It's a marriage word, actually. It doesn't really matter whether you're doing well or you're having great difficulty. You're doing well. They're still a friend. If you're doing difficultly, they're still a friend.

And you may feel completely useless to that other person, and that's precisely the point. They are with you because they are a friend. It is a humbling experience to be a true friend, to have a true friend.

Lewis says that the true friend wonders what he's doing there amongst this group of his betters. Lucky beyond dessert to be in such company. He says something beyond the world opens itself to our minds as we talk together and affection mellowed by the years enfolds us.

[13 : 07] Life, natural life, has no better gift to give. Who could have deserved it? And that's what friendship is. That's by far the longest point.

And the second point is so how does friendship work? Well, how does God come to bear? How do we be good friends and maintain good friends and grow as good friends?

Proverbs, of course, points out a number of things to avoid. Avoid the dishonest person. Avoid a violent person. Avoid the angry person. These are all, you can find, verses in Proverbs.

Don't be a companion of gluttons or fools. Avoid a flatterer. Flattery is a form of hatred. And in chapter 19 there are a few verses, just a little paragraph about the sad reality that the more money you have the more fake friends you will have and the poorer you are the less good friends you will have.

It's just a reality. But again, Proverbs doesn't give us a list. These are the 19 qualities you need. They show us how friendship works. And the teaching in Proverbs about how friendship works come, they, it gathers around two magnetic poles.

[14 : 24] And I've called one magnetic pole the hands of friendship and the other the feet of friendship. So the hands of true friendship are truth and thoughtfulness.

It is impossible to have a friendship with someone who lies. a dishonest man spreads strife, a whisperer separates close friends. But it is not truth on its own that grows friendship.

It is truth with thoughtfulness, truth with love. Because you can have truth without love in all sorts of forms and it can break a friendship.

I mean, gossip is a form of truth without love. but it comes from pride and arrogance and will destroy true friendships. And there's a lot of, I mean, there's a lot of Christian gossip these days.

It passes for prayer points and concern. And what is said is often true but it's usually said to make people feel better about themselves. But friendship is a kind of love that rejoices in the best of the other person.

[15 : 33] And whenever we bring the truth it will be for their sake. Which means there will be times of heartfelt honesty and there will be times to listen. It depends on what is best for your friend.

So, chapter 27 verse 14. Whoever blesses his neighbour with a loud voice rising early in the morning will be counted as cursing.

This should be a memory verse for all of us, I think. Or chapter 25 verse 20. Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day.

And like vinegar on soda. There are times to sing songs to a heavy heart and times to listen. True friendship means you're engaged enough to know what time it is.

And even when time for truth comes, it has to be said and delivered in a way that's good. So, one of the most famous proverbs is there in 27, 17.

[16 : 32] Iron sharpens iron and one man sharpens another. If someone is your authentic friend, they will not shy away from criticism. They'll tell you you've lost your edge.

They won't be fawning or flattering, they'll be honest with you. But it's not just the truth they bring, it's how they say it and when they say it. I have a very good friend who for four years of my life, a long time ago, this is pretty well all he did with me and I'm still not sure why.

I should ask him one day but I'm very grateful because the way he did it made it possible for me to hear it. And these are the hands of true friendship, how friendship works, truth and thoughtfulness.

But they're also feet of true friendship and I've called this truth and faithfulness. And this is what keeps friendship on the path of life, the path of wisdom. It's truth with faithfulness to God.

So verses 5 and 6 in chapter 27. Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

[17 : 46] See, friendship's not feeding on itself. Friendship is a gift from God and it's accountable to him. It's not a mutual admiration society turned inside.

It's a place of change and growing faced outside since the wisest thing that we can do for each other and for ourselves is to be faithful to God. And the contrast in verse 5 of open rebuke and hidden love says that if it's time for rebuke and you say nothing, you don't love the person.

You're just being selfish. You're just taking the line of least resistance. You're frightened to disturb the peace even when your friend needs it most. You refuse to cross the pain line.

But he says faithful are the wounds of a friend. If they're faithful to God, those wounds, and it's an image of words that are difficult to speak, they might bring life and healing.

They might deal with an issue. They might heal and restore a broken friendship. And faithful is a binding word. You're bound to the person because there's something bigger than just the two of you involved and engaged in the friendship.

[18 : 58] It doesn't mean you can't be close friends with someone who is not a Christian. But for you to be faithful means the feet of friendship have both truth and faithfulness.

And without both of those together, you will limp or you will stumble off the way. I was talking to someone this week who's had a number of conversations with people who have left the Christian faith and they've migrated to new groups of friends.

And they say about their new groups of friends, they don't judge us. And he said it might be because their Christian friends were judgmental. But he suspects it's because they just did not want to be called to account.

The point of Proverbs is that there's something larger than us engaged and involved in true friendships. And because of that, it is possible then to take the risk of speaking God's truth for the sake of being faithful.

Thirdly and finally, where does it come from? Where does true friendship come from? It comes from God. Christianity is unique. Other religions do not have a God who desires friendship.

[20 : 08] The God of the Bible is unique. He has made us for not just friendship but eternal friendship with each other and with him. And we have glimpses of this in the Old Testament.

Abraham believed God. He was called a friend of God. A friend of God? You know, a servant perhaps? A child of God? Wow!

But a friend of God? And this Remembrance Day weekend, we're very thankful to everyone for all those who gave their lives. And we're also always very conscious together.

There's been a greater death that has had a greater benefit which changes us eternally. And on the night before he was crucified, as Jesus is going to the cross, on the night when his face was covered with the betraying kisses of Judas, on the night when he washed the disciples' feet, he says this.

He says, greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. And then he says to the eleven, no longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing, but I have called you friends.

[21 : 20] For all that I have heard from my father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you. He's explaining to us what he's doing on the cross.

that in the cross Jesus comes to establish the deepest and eternal friendship with us. And on the cross he sacrifices his eternal friendship with the father to bring us into that eternal friendship with God the father.

And I think every single one of us realises we've not been good friends, we failed to live toward God and toward others, you know, we failed to love, we're fearful of people knowing us, and in the cross he takes us to himself and on the cross he says it is finished.

We are bound as friends forever. You are secure in the love of the father. And that means we are able to forgive and love, we're able to be truthful and thoughtful and faithful.

He will never let you down. His friendship is a source of unending sweetness and truth and counsel. He is the friend we most need.

[22 : 37] And this is not a one-off inoculation. As we grow and struggle, the strength for friendship ultimately comes from Christ. The power and pattern of friendship comes from the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we want to be these people and we want people who come amongst us, friends and neighbours and associates, not just to hear the gospel, but to experience relationships that can only be explained by the gospel.

We want to point each other and ourselves and everyone to Jesus Christ who is the friend of sinners. Let's kneel and pray.