

Wisdom for Living: A True Friend

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Preacher: Rev. James Wagner

[0 : 0 0] Well, you've heard it said that a dog is a man's best friend, and a diamond is a girl's best friend. Personally, I think that the men have it better, but then again, that's what you would expect.

Well, I can't think of two sayings that trivialize friendship more. Friendship is not a trivial matter. In fact, friendship, far from trivial, is terrific when we have a good one, but it's deeply troubling when we have none.

Well, at least 15% of the residents of the greater Vancouver region fit into the latter category. And what I'd like to say for the remaining 85%, the former is the case, I can't confidently draw that conclusion.

So you might ask, well, how do you know, James? What do you mean? Well, the Vancouver Coastal Health Authorities, My Health, My Community Survey of 2014, discovered that 15% of people in the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority region are socially isolated.

Extrapolate that to the greater Vancouver region, and that makes 300,000 lonely people. The survey called Connections and Engagement, conducted by the Vancouver Foundation in 2012, and you've probably heard of this one, revealed that Metro Vancouver can be a hard place to make friends, that neighborhood connections are cordial but weak, and that many residents are retreating from community life.

[1 : 3 9] So James Taylor's song, if you remember this one, You've Got a Friend, doesn't ring true for a lot of people in Vancouver. This morning, we're going to look at the subject of friendship from the book of Proverbs.

So far, we've looked at gaining wisdom, healing anger, thinking clearly, and we continue to see what wisdom has brought to bear on the matter of friendship. I don't stand before you as an expert or a best friend, but I look back over my friendships from my earliest memories to the most recent ones, and I know that I've failed my friends, and at the same time, I've enjoyed the grace and mercy of God through others, who I have no right to call my friends, even if, for some reason, they might be on my Facebook page.

So, where is friendship? I want to begin first by looking at the terms that may encompass friendship in our lesson that was read earlier today, and you'll want to turn to that with me in Proverbs chapter 27, if you're not already there.

So, in chapter 27, verse 6, we actually see that friends are mentioned three times. In verse 6, faithful are the wounds of a friend. In verse 9, the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel.

And then in 10, twice, do not forsake your friend or your father's friend. But that's not the only relationship that's described in these verses. Others are worth noting, this whole kind of mix of relationships that we have.

[3 : 0 8] Brother is also mentioned here in verse 10. Do not go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity. Also, neighbor in that verse is mentioned, isn't it?

Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away. Okay? Verse 14, whoever blesses his neighbor with a loud voice. I don't know if you did that when you rose up this morning.

Last night I was up late and the alarm on my car went off. And they probably would have seen that or counted that as a curse as well. Right.

But a stranger, verse 13. Take a man's garment when he has put up security for a stranger. Enemy is mentioned here. Back up in verse 6.

We'll come back to that. And of course then the wife is mentioned here too. A continual dripping on a rainy day and a quarrelsome wife are alike. I won't read the rest of that.

[4 : 04] But I bet you're glad that I extended the reading this morning to verse 17. Iron sharpens iron and one man sharpens another. Another, thank God for Proverbs 31.

If you haven't read the book of Proverbs, all you have to do is read one a day to get through it in a month. Let me commend that to you. And then you'll know what I'm talking about when I mention chapter 31.

Well, the first principle of wise friendship, I think, is that of a covenant. By that I don't mean a formal vow or a pledge. And in fact, in many respects, that would be antithetical to friendship.

Friends don't formalize their relationship with a witness. And if you were to do that, it would probably undermine your relationship in a friendship. But Proverbs 17, 17 reads this.

You're welcome to turn to that. It's not in chapter 27, but verse 17 of chapter 17. A friend loves at all time and a brother is born for adversity. This proverb, to live by, conveys the covenant or commitment between friends.

[5 : 06] Notice that it reads, at all times. All means always, not when it is convenient. And it means drop everything to be by a friend's side.

Furthermore, blood may be thicker than water, but let's face it. Relatives are not the same as friends. The love of siblings is driven, I think, by duty.

Not that there's anything wrong with that. The love of friends is driven by desire. In other words, a brother is born for adversity. Therefore, there's an obligation. If there's something going wrong in your life, a brother should come to the rescue.

A sister should do that. But there are no obligations between friends. The thought of should doesn't occur. Rather, it's want. I have a friend from Abbotsford who is in Vancouver General Hospital right now.

He's been there for three months. He's had his fourth operation on his hip. Until this past week, he had no right hip. And when I found out that he was in a hospital, I wanted to go immediately.

[6 : 06] The desire was there. It wasn't about duty. It wasn't about obligation. But I then realized that I was fitting it into my work day. And all of a sudden, I thought to myself, wait a minute. This isn't work. This is a friend.

You want to go and visit him. And so then I realized, well, I shouldn't fit this into my work day somewhere. It should be after my work day. Well, wherever that begins and ends. But anyway, I wanted to visit this friend.

Visiting him was driven by desire. But then as things began to develop, I thought, you know, wouldn't it be great if this friend of mine could have a Stephen minister? Kind of the exact kind of situation you want.

Lay people that have been trained to care for people under circumstances just like this. Be it divorce or grief or death or the loss of a job or some other kind of crisis in their life.

Wouldn't it be great for him to have a Stephen minister? So long as I didn't see that as the visit that he should have. That I should continue. Well, there's that word not should.

[7 : 03] That I want to continue visiting my friend. Friendship is driven by desire. And so there are real bonds of affection between friends. There's a great desire for friends to remain with one another.

The two are not one in this case. But the Puritans, I'm told, refer to friends as bosom buddies. And the desire runs deep and draws the two together and drives the two on a mutual journey.

If you think of friendship and other relationships in terms of position to people, I think that it's friends that in fact kind of look outwardly on the world in which we live in.

Where it is maybe a family or certainly a marriage where people look inwardly upon one another. This friendship, the posture of it is outward into the world in which we live with one another.

So this is the first principle, I think, of wise friendship. That of kind of a covenant. This promise. Not that's formalized. But people that are together with one another in that way.

[8 : 11] And when we think in the Old Testament, if you think of two men that were friends, it must be Jonathan and David that come to mind. But if we think of women, it must be, I would imagine, Ruth and Naomi.

Many who were actually from different generations, weren't they? But had this kind of covenant with one another. This covenantal love. Well, the second principle of friendship, I think, is courage.

It takes a little courage to start a friendship, but even more to keep it going. It's not to say that the same doesn't apply to marriage or neighborliness or other relationships. Courage and boldness is the spirited way to begin and build any relationship, including friendship.

Friendship isn't casual or easy. And in fact, sometimes it can be painful. Paul Simon in his song entitled, I am a rock, I am an island, expressed the pain of friendship when he sung, I've built walls, a fortress deep and mighty that none may penetrate.

You may remember this line now, as sad as it is. I have no need of friendship. Friendship causes pain. It's laughter and it's loving. I disdain. How sad that is, isn't it?

[9 : 22] But there is a risk of pain in friendship, but wise friendship knows when to bring pain. The pain of friendship isn't to hurt, biblically, but to heal.

Proverbs 27, 6 reads this. You can flip back there. Faithful are the wounds of a friend. Profuse are the kisses of an enemy. Did you hear the courage expressed in that proverb?

At first it sounds like it should read, faithful are the kisses of a friend. Profuse are the wounds of an enemy. However, you know a friend is a friend when she or he cares enough to correct you.

What warning from a friend isn't just what we need to stave off disaster or danger? If you were to compare a friend with a surgeon or a nurse and had to choose between the two, which one would it be?

A surgeon and a nurse. Your friend. What are they more like, right? Well, I think both are important. I would always want a nurse and a surgeon. But nurses don't cause wounds like surgeons do, and for the same reason, do they?

[10 : 27] If it's there, you want them to go in and after that, don't you? Which causes a great deal of pain. Great to have nurses afterwards, but I gather that friendship is a little bit like a surgeon in your life.

What requires courage to act like this kind of friend in another person's life? And let me ask this. When was the last time a friend cared enough to tell you something that was difficult for you to hear?

And when was the last time you cared for a friend in this way? I was wounded the other day when someone said to me after looking at my wedding album, you don't smile that much in pictures, and you look just a little bit angry.

My wife kind of rescued me from that and reminded the person how stressful that day can be, even though it's celebratory. But it was a little bit true. I knew, maybe not in that moment, but generally speaking in my life, that that's what I needed to hear that sometimes I project.

Maybe that's projecting something that's actually inside of me. I need to smile a little more. Well, friends should do this for one another, and it takes a lot of courage, risk, and boldness, doesn't it?

[11 : 39] In fact, sometimes the wound is just at the beginning, but it's not only rebuke, it's for reform. In Psalm 27.9 reads this, Counsel isn't just the negative, it's the positive.

It is, don't do this, do that. It needs to be in earnest, with courage, or courageously, caringly.

And it's always by the Holy Spirit. So sometimes there's respect to sin, but other times it's just about character. And we must remember that it's only by the Holy Spirit who can convict and conform and transform our lives by the renewal of our minds.

So that we can worship the Lord our God with all our hearts and our mind and our soul and our strength. And love our neighbors, our friends, as ourselves. And so when a friend takes courage, don't dismiss his or her counsel.

Receive it like oil and perfume for the soul. In fact, don't wait for a friend to come and counsel you. Ask a friend. Counsel me. Honestly. Openly.

[12 : 55] Hopefully. Well, the last principle of wise friendship then is that it must be Christ-centered. There are 14 proverbs about friendship in this book that helps us live wisely.

And I won't go through all 14 of them. I've only read to you three of them and I'll refer to a few more now. But these ones that I have mentioned by way of principles for living in relationship with friends are not exhausted.

They're more to read. But it would be foolish if I didn't point us to the wisdom of God made flesh in Jesus Christ, the ultimate friend. Proverbs 22, 11 reads.

You're welcome to flip back to this if you like. He who loves purity of heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king as his friend.

Wow. That's amazing. And Solomon wrote this. It's safe to say that he had himself and his successors in mind. However, I don't think there's any reason why we shouldn't think that it's Jesus who perfectly fulfills the place of the king, who is our friend in this proverb.

[14 : 05] John 15, 15. Jesus states this. The key principle in friendship is knowing Jesus.

We can't have good friends and be good friends apart from the friendship of our Lord. I confess I haven't read the book, How to Win Friends and Influence People by D.L. Carnegie.

But friendship isn't built on advice, techniques, or models. Friendship is received long before it's ever given in relationship with Jesus.

The defining element of that friendship is, as the proverb states, purity of heart and graciousness of speech. And this is only possible by what our Heavenly Father has promised to us through the Son, who is our friend, when we know what the Father has said to him and he makes known to us.

Now, wouldn't it be great if Christians were the most committed, the painfully true, the wildly courageous friends in the world? And when we know Jesus is our friend, our king, and let him purify our heart and speak through us, we can be a friend not only of Jesus, but like Jesus.

[15 : 29] Today's second lesson included, or sorry, first lesson included these words. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, he has a demon.

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, look at him, a glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.

Friends, there's a great opportunity for the church, and everywhere we go, to give and grow in friendship. The way to go about measuring friendship isn't by quantity, or take a risk, maybe even quality.

I'm not suggesting low quality of friendship here, but to say that how many friends, or how deep a friend is, may not be the issue, but this phrase points the way that wisdom is justified by her deeds.

Jesus says that he's tying the end back with the beginning. And the disciples of John the Baptist wanted to know if Jesus was the real deal. He wasn't what they expected. But Jesus didn't just talk the talk, sorry for the cliché, but he walked it.

[16 : 40] Both Jesus and John the Baptist came with a message, and they lived it. Their messages were delivered differently, but they were consistent with one another. Preaching about repentance, and one for baptism, the other for belief in Jesus.

Right? They were continuous. So their messages were delivered differently, but completely consistent with one another. And Jesus is saying, look at the root, and look at the fruit. And wisdom is proved.

Wisdom is proved in the friendship that Jesus gave to others. And what were those deeds? If you go back to the top of that chapter, Well, the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news preached to them.

Hmm. The greatest deed with Jesus makes us friends as sinners is the forgiveness of our sins. Well, when we know that, we can do all that Solomon lays out in the book of Proverbs as far as friendship is concerned, but not before then.

Not before we know Jesus as our friend and all that he did for us. So why bother with friendship? Maybe that's what Paul Simon was suggesting, but the motivation for friendship should bring us right back to who Jesus is.

[17 : 56] I think of the provincial health authorities. It's very clear that if the trend continues, they're concerned that it's going to cost the system a lot of money, isn't it? We know the lack of friendship affects one's mental and social and physical health.

It will be a big burden to the system if people don't have those friendships. Who knows? I'm maybe a little bit cynical here, but the Vancouver Foundation report may not be motivated by money, but perhaps maybe by appearance.

We don't want people who are coming here to think that Vancouver is an unfriendly city. And our motivation can't come from duty, though there's a place for that, I think, especially in our relationships with family members and siblings, or design, which is that what in part motivates our relationship with a husband and wife.

And desire as well when it comes to friendship. But I think there's something else going on here in terms of motivation for friendship between people. Listen to what C.S. Lewis says.

Friendship is not a reward for our discrimination. In friendship, we think we have chosen our peers. In reality, a secret master of ceremonies has been at work.

[19 : 09] Christ, who said to the disciples, You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, can truly say to every group of Christian friends, You have not chosen one another, but I have chosen you for one another.

Friendship is not a reward for our discriminating and good tastes in finding one another out. It is the instrument by which God reveals to each of us the beauties of the other.

I think the motivation for friendship has to do with who God is, and as he brings us together, and we are able to see him through one another.

We're created in the image of God, and when we have friendship with one another, we do behold who the Lord is. Let's pray. I want to give you thanks for friendship.

And Jesus, you show us what it means to be the perfect friend. We be thanks for the promises that you've made known to us, for the courage in dying and rising and ascending into heaven.

[20 : 18] Jesus, we thank you that you are the friend of sinners like every one of us. Help us not to let that come between you and us, and know that the cross has resolved that.

Help us also at the same time to allow you to befriend others to us, and us to receive the friendship of others that you show to us through them.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.