

Friendship: Walking in Wisdom

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, church. Would you turn with me to the Old Testament book of Proverbs? That book begins on page 527 in the Pew Bible. We're considering the theme of wisdom this summer.

That is the skill of living life well, which is what the book of Proverbs is all about. And what Proverbs has been showing us is that wisdom is a bit like a diamond. A diamond has lots of sides, lots of aspects, but when you look into a diamond, you get to see most of those or all those different sides at once, sort of reflecting and refracting the light in these brilliant ways.

A diamond is one thing with lots of sides, and as a whole, it makes a thing of beauty. And what we've been seeing is wisdom is like that. Wisdom is a life. Wisdom is an integrated whole, but it has lots of sides and lots of aspects that together create a thing of beauty.

So each week this summer, we've been taking up a different aspect, a different side of wisdom. And today, we come to the theme of friendship. Look at Proverbs 18.24 with me.

We'll start with just one verse this morning as we dive in. Proverbs 18.24 says, A man of many companions comes to ruin, but there is a friend that sticks closer than a brother.

[1 : 2 0] Now, friendship is something that's notoriously hard to define, isn't it? Philosophers have kind of wrestled with the nature of friendship for a long time. Last year, a professor at Princeton named Alexander Nahum has published a book called On Friendship.

It's 300 pages long. Of course, only a philosopher can take a subject like friendship and write 300 awesome, rich, thick pages. That's what you've got to love about philosophy.

And when asked in an interview to define friendship, he said, friendship is difficult to describe. It's easier to say what friendship is not, he said, and foremost, it's not instrumental.

What he means by that is that friendship isn't some means to some other end. You don't use the person to get something else. That's not what friendship is all about. C.S. Lewis in a chapter on friendship says that friendship arises out of the sea of all of our sort of mere companions when two people discover that they have some common interest or insight that others don't share.

In other words, he says the typical expression of opening friendship would be something like, what? You too? I thought I was the only one. But if friendship is hard to define, it's also perhaps even harder to do.

[2 : 3 8] Often the very tools and technologies that are meant to facilitate relationships and friendships, things like smartphones and apps like Facebook, the incredible ease of travel that we live in in the 21st century.

I mean, just think about it. A trip to New York City to visit a friend takes what today? Like a couple of hours max, right? You know, but think about it. A couple hundred years ago in the 18th century, for instance, when Jonathan Edwards was leaving his first pastorate, traveling from New York City back to Hartford, he was getting all sad and emotional in his journal because he knew that he'd rarely get the chance to see those people again.

It was like a multiple day trip. It wasn't something you could just jump on the train and go to in a couple hours. But very interestingly today, the very tools that are meant to facilitate friendships for us actually can have the reverse effect and make them all the more difficult.

We're constantly interrupted by our cell phones. Our friends on Facebook number in the hundreds. And we all know, right, that you can't actually have a meaningful friendship with hundreds of people.

And the ease of travel has created a transience in our culture, an ease of movement for school or job or just preference that actually makes maintaining friendships incredibly difficult.

[3 : 56] As soon as you make a good friend, they move away. Or you move away. And yet here in Proverbs, we're being told that friendship, as hard as it is to define, as hard as it is to do, is worth the effort.

Friendship is part of the truly wise life. So why don't we take a look in the next couple of minutes at what Proverbs has to say about what a good friend looks like.

What sort of friends ought we to be? What's the nature of true friendship? And I think there are at least three points that Proverbs makes here. Derek Kidner lists some of these in his excellent little commentary on Proverbs.

And I'm following his lead. The first thing that we see in Proverbs is that a good friend is constant. Look again at Proverbs 18, 24.

A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Now, we've all experienced fair-weather friends, right?

[5 : 07] Friends who kind of come and go, depending on your circumstance. And Proverbs is actually quite honest about that experience, too. Just listen to some of these verses. Don't turn there. From chapter 14. The poor is disliked by his neighbor, but the rich has many friends.

And from chapter 19. Wealth brings many new friends, but a poor man is deserted by his friend. Many seek the favor of a generous man, and everyone is a friend to a man who gives gifts.

But all a poor man's brothers hate him. How much more do his friends go far from him? He pursues them with words, but does not have them. Such friends, Proverbs is telling us, aren't really friends at all.

Rather, as you see there in 18:24, a friend is one who sticks closer than a brother, not just in good times, but in bad times as well.

Look just across the page at Proverbs 17, 17. Proverbs 17, 17. A friend loves at all times. A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.

[6 : 18] A true friend loves at all times. They are constant. Even in seasons of adversity. Of course, I think the great biblical example of this is the friendship between Jonathan and David.

I mean, think of how easy it would have been and how tempting it would have been for Jonathan to drop David as a friend.

We often sort of skim through those narratives in 1 Samuel, not realizing what's at stake. I mean, think about it. After all, not only was David being hunted by Jonathan's own father, but David had been anointed the next king of Israel.

In other words, David was going to take Jonathan's place on the throne when Saul died. How would you feel about it if your friend was going to usurp your place on the throne?

And yet, Jonathan remains loyal in his friendship to David. He stuck by him, even when it was personally costly, even when David was experiencing affliction, and even when he himself was actually going to have something to lose.

[7 : 31] True friendship is constant. But we see here in Proverbs that a good friend is not just constant, a good friend is also candid. Turn to chapter 27 in the book of Proverbs.

27 verse 9. 27 verse 9 reads, oil and perfume make the heart glad.

And the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel. What makes a friendship truly sweet? Proverbs is saying it's actually more than just common interest.

The sweetness of a friend comes from his or her earnest counsel, from their being honest, from their being forthright, from them being candid with you.

In other words, a friend isn't someone who's just going to tell you what you want to hear all the time. They'll give you input. They'll give you advice that's candid. What's the alternative to that? Proverbs 29 5.

[8 : 32] Proverbs 29 5 says, a man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet. A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet. Now, it's helpful to know, actually, as an aside, that the Hebrew word in Proverbs for neighbor and for friend, they're actually translating the same word.

So, the Hebrew word actually just means something like another person that you're close to. And of course, that can mean sort of emotional or personal closeness. That's why we translate it as friend sometimes. Or it can just mean spatial closeness, geographical closeness.

That's why it's your neighbor. The context kind of helps us know whether we should think of friend or think of neighbor. But sometimes, you know, it could go either way. So, in Proverbs 29 5, it's telling us that flattery of your neighbor or even more poignantly of a friend is setting them up to walk right into a trap.

So, think about it. Have your friends, have your good friends even, have they ever disagreed with you? Have they ever given you earnest counsel?

Or are they afraid to step on your toes? And more importantly, have you been that sort of friend to others? Are you willing to put yourself in the position to be candid?

[9 : 47] Even if you know it might not land all that well at first. It's a lot easier to just flatter one another, isn't it? Oftentimes, I think we define friendship today as a person who just always affirms me and offers zero resistance.

Who are my really good friends? The persons who are just always going to affirm me. The person who says, look, I just want you to be happy, do what you feel is best. Oh, they're a real friend to me. But you know, according to Proverbs, the sort of friendship, that sort of friendship, if that's all it is, actually isn't friendship at all.

Or at least it's a very, very thin version of it. We see this theme a lot in Proverbs actually. Proverbs 27.6. This is maybe a familiar one to some of us.

Proverbs 27.6. Faithful are the wounds of a friend. Profuse are the kisses of an enemy. Or as Oscar Wilde jokingly put it, a true friend stabs you in the front.

A true friend stabs you in the front. Not sure exactly what Oscar Wilde meant by that actually. You can go do that research yourself. Now, a couple weeks ago, Matt took us through the topic of giving and receiving correction in Proverbs.

[11 : 07] So we're not going to spend a lot of time talking about this. If you want to go learn more about that aspect of friendship, you can look at that sermon on the website or on the podcast. But friends, just for a second, would you agree that you need those sort of friends?

And do you see how that's what it means for you to be a good friend? That friendship is something that's supposed to sharpen us and bring us forth into the kind of people that God wants us to be, not just allow us to kind of remain where we are.

But there's one more thing that Proverbs points out. A good friend isn't just constant, isn't just candid. A good friend is also thoughtful. Thoughtful. In other words, a good friend is sensitive to the feelings and the situation of the other person.

Proverbs, on this front, actually gives a bunch of examples of what not to do. And some are funny, like Proverbs 27, 14, which we saw a few weeks ago.

Whoever blesses his neighbor or his friend with a loud voice rising early in the morning will be counted as cursing. Here's how I would translate that. Look, friends don't text friends before 8 a.m., okay?

[12 : 22] I haven't had my cup of coffee yet. I don't want to see your emoji cons. I don't want to see the gif of a kitty cat giving a high five to a baby. I'm just kidding.

You can text me before 8 a.m. That's fine. Just not before 7 a.m. That's where I draw the line. But the point is, I think that Proverbs is meant to sort of make humorously here, is a good friend is thoughtful.

They're not just sort of rampaging through their different relationships. They're thoughtful about the other person. According to Proverbs 25, 17, a good friend is thoughtful about not overstaying their welcome. Let your foot seldom be in your neighbor's or your friend's house.

Lest he have his fill of you and hate you. Know when to give the other person some space, Proverbs says. Don't always force yourself in.

A good friend doesn't smother the other person. And we all sort of sense this, right? There's a certain kind of freedom in friendship that makes it what it is.

[13 : 21] You can't force it. You've got to let it breathe. So Proverbs is saying, a good friend knows when to give it some space. And you also need to know when something just isn't funny.

Proverbs 26, 18. Proverbs 26, 18. Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death is the man who deceives his neighbor, his friend, and says, I'm only joking.

Look, a good friend knows when the joke has gone far enough and you cut it out. And probably as a good, thoughtful friend, you apologize for some of the things you already said.

Have you ever been in a friendship where it seems like the constant tenor of that friendship is sort of just poking fun at each other, razzing each other, poking each other? I'm only joking.

And yet it wears thin. A good friend knows when the joke is played out. So then a good friend is thoughtful. This is an important balance to the point about a good friend being candid, isn't it?

[14 : 35] There are times, yes, when you should give some earnest counsel or even a faithful wound. But have you actually been thoughtful, careful, about what the other person is going through?

Sometimes people just need someone to listen to them. The Apostle Paul puts it quite beautifully, I think. He says, we need to rejoice with those who rejoice and we need to weep with those who weep.

That's a pretty good picture of friendship, I think. Your joys are my joys. Your sorrows are my sorrows. In other words, don't think that real friendship means clobbering each other with the candor stick all the time.

Correction, correction, correction. Yes, iron sharpens iron. We need that. We need to spur one another on to love and good deeds, but we need to do that with deep sympathy for each other's weaknesses.

Just like Jesus, our great high priest, sympathizes with all our weaknesses. So a good friend is constant, is candid, is thoughtful.

[15 : 41] They're with you through thick and thin. They're willing to be honest when you need it and they're caring. They listen to you. They know you. They see into your heart. They welcome you. That's what wise friendship looks like.

That's the mark we're aiming for in friendships according to Proverbs. So I think it might be helpful to just take a moment and think about some of your friendships.

Of course, it would be easy for all of us to start thinking of all the ways our friends have fallen short of this ideal toward us. But instead, examine your own heart. What sort of friend have you and I been?

How do you need to change and grow? Is it your constancy? Is it your candor? Your thoughtfulness? How about talking about it over lunch today?

How about bringing that up in your lunchtime conversation? You know, here's the part of friendship I think I can actually get better at. This is the part I think I struggle with. This is the part I really appreciate. What do you think?

[16 : 54] Think for a moment about the sort of friend you've been. And if you're married, start with your spouse, with your wife, with your husband. Because after all, even if marriage means more than friendship, it certainly doesn't mean less.

What sort of friendship are you cultivating with your spouse? What have you done in the last week, the last two weeks, the last month that would genuinely kindle your friendship?

If you and I had coffee this afternoon, how would you answer that? Would you be able to answer that? You know, there's a funny thing that happens when we get married. Before marriage, you look at this person and you think, they are my best friend.

I couldn't live without them. And then somewhere around 48 hours after the honeymoon, couples are like, man, I just don't get to spend any time with my friends anymore.

I don't know what's going on. Or you ask a married person, so who are your friends? And they're like, well, I had some friends in college. You know, I got married. So much for that.

[18 : 01] How ridiculous, right? My guess is that 50% or more of marriage problems are because we just stop actively pursuing real friendship together.

We spend so much time saying, I've got to love this person. I've got to love this person that we forget to actually like them. We forget to actually cultivate a friendship with them.

And Proverbs is showing us that friendship, yeah, takes some work. Friendship might be something that sort of starts out, like Lewis describes, as something you just sort of happen upon, something you stumble into.

What? You too? I thought I was the only one. You know, but from there, constancy, candor, thoughtfulness, the marks of real friendship, those don't just happen naturally. You need to be intentional.

Husbands, wives, you need to keep pursuing one another as friends. But of course, the application of this is much broader than the husbands and wives. We know that all of us, married or single, male or female, introvert or extrovert.

[19 : 06] All of us need to be pursuing friendship. This is what wise living, living with the grain of God's created universe is all about.

After all, friends, think about it. If God is a trinity, if the one God exists eternally in three persons, if at the heart of ultimate reality is relationship, the deep, eternal reality of love and friendship within God Himself, among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, if that's true about who God is, then as human beings made in God's image, we too are made to function at our best in friendship.

And of course, for most of us at a very practical level, that's probably going to mean a shift of some priorities to make time for it. I'm as much guilty of this as anybody else.

It's going to mean a shift of some priorities, maybe taking on one less project at work or taking on one less improvement project around the house, spending a little less time on that hobby or that pastime or binging on Netflix or whatever, spending a little more time face-to-face with those two or three people you're developing a real friendship with.

Maybe it means stepping out of your comfort zone and initiating with one or two people, taking the first step, taking the second step, not just waiting around for it to happen. Sometimes it means stepping out of our comfort zone and initiating even if we haven't had luck with that in the past.

[20 : 40] And of course, we know that when the rubber hits the road, that's hard. All of that. It's hard to say no at work. It's hard to give up the time doing the leisurely thing you love to do, reading or hiking or whatever it is.

But friends, think about it. What's the alternative? What if we don't do the hard work of friendship? The alternative is that we remain stuck always in the superficial.

Paul Tripp puts it this way in one of his books. He says, we live in interwoven networks of terminally casual relationships. relationships. We live in interwoven networks of terminally casual relationships.

We live with the delusion that we know one another, but we really don't. We call our easygoing, self-protective, and often theologically platitudinous conversations fellowship, but they seldom ever reach the threshold of true fellowship.

Ouch. And yet, how often is that true, friends? Maybe another way of asking this is to ask, who really knows you?

[21 : 58] Who's behind the curtain of your life? And who do you know well? But it doesn't have to be this way, you know.

What if the church became the place where friendship was something we worked hard at? For a long time, the church has rightfully put a huge value on marriage, and yet we've let our thinking and our acting in friendship emaciate.

And yet, that's not the biblical picture. Friendship is something that's deeply valuable and incredibly important.

What if the church became the place where we caught that biblical vision again, and friendship was something that we gave ourselves to, that we worked hard at? No, you're not going to be friends with absolutely everyone.

No, we're never going to do friendship perfectly, but what if this was the place where the epidemic of loneliness that's eating us up culturally, and it is? What if this was the place where just our deep-seated loneliness as a culture was met by the force of something greater?

[23 : 13] What if the church was the place where friendships took root, not on the basis of some common interest or on the basis of some common workout schedule or some common place to do happy hour?

What if the church was the place where friendship took root in something much deeper, more powerful, more lasting, more satisfying than all of that? In other words, what if the church was the place where you could be known and know others in and through the love of God in a way that was constant and candid and deeply, richly thoughtful?

In the book of Acts, Luke gives us a snapshot of the early church at the end of chapter 2 and he says, they devoted themselves, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

I don't know about you, but we skip over that second phrase pretty quickly, don't we? They devoted themselves to the fellowship. Rich relationships weren't a casual, secondary thing for our brothers and sisters in the early church.

They devoted themselves to it. And what happened as a result? Luke tells us in the rest of Acts 2, he says, and the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved as the power of the gospel expressed itself, yes, in a devotion to the apostles' teaching and into all-filled worship and into deep, rich prayer, but also, friends, in devoted fellowship.

[24 : 49] As the power of the gospel expressed itself in that kind of friendship and fellowship, God used it as a means to grow the church, to bring more and more people to himself.

What if part of our evangelistic strategy in the time and in the place that God has for us has to entail friendship? I think it does, friends.

And here's why, because the life of Christ is not going to look plausible to your neighbors or my neighbors unless they see relationships where that's being lived out and made visible and made real before their very eyes.

You and I know that following Christ is incredibly countercultural. How are our friends going to even picture what that looks like unless here in this place there are friendships where that's being lived out with joy and with deep meaning?

So true friendship is constant, it's candid, and it's thoughtful. But you know, the book of Proverbs is a very realistic book.

[25 : 58] It admits that this sort of friendship is very rare. Proverbs 26 says, Many a man proclaims his steadfast love, but a faithful man who can find?

Aristotle supposedly once exclaimed, Oh, my friends, there is no friend. Who can find a friend like we've been describing?

You might be thinking, I've never had a friend like that. And newsflash, most of my experiences in church have not been like that. You might be thinking, all of my friends have been fickle and not constant.

They've moved away, they've stopped calling, they're surfacy, they're not candid, they barely know me. Constant, candid, thoughtful, no one's ever been a friend to me like that.

How can I turn around and be that kind of friend? Oh, my friends, there is no friend. But are we so sure about that?

[27 : 05] What if you actually did have a friend like that? Constant, completely truthful and honest and yet utterly thoughtful and loving. What if you did have a friend who knew you at that deep level, who pursued you, who stuck it out through your ups and downs?

What if you had a friend like that? Wouldn't you be able then to turn around and be a friend like that? If you knew that amidst all your companions and acquaintances, you had a friend who stuck closer than a brother, it would change everything, wouldn't it?

Wouldn't it give you the courage to step out and make new friends if you had at least one really good friend? And wouldn't it give you the strength to let go of old friends if you knew that there was one who stuck closer than a brother?

If you had that sort of friend, would it not then empower you to be that sort of friend? And yet again, has anyone ever had a friend like that? Well, friends, here's the good news, is that despite what you may think, the message of Christianity is that we have and we do, you see.

In the last days of His earthly ministry, Jesus said, greater love has no one than this, than a man laid down his life for his friends. And you know what happened that very night?

[28 : 30] That very night in the Garden of Gethsemane, while we were falling asleep, while we were showing ourselves to be unconstant and unfaithful and unthoughtful, as we failed to be the friend that He deserved, Jesus Christ goes forward.

He meets this gang of torches and spears that had come for Him and all the rest of them, and He says, if you seek Me, let these men go. and in our place, Jesus goes forward into that gang who had come with bloodthirstiness for Him.

And He goes forward to the cross, losing all of His earthly friends along the way, losing even the Heavenly Father's favor as He became sin for us on the cross.

friends, do you see what God has become for you in Christ? He's become your true friend, sharing all of our infirmities, not a single need, not a single temptation, not a single heartache is foreign to Him.

Sharing all of our infirmities and sticking closer to us than a brother, even when it meant laying down His own life for us. And after laying down His life, we know that after His suffering on the third day, He rose again, reconciling us to the Father, making it true that for all who turn and trust in Him once and for all, we can become the friends of God.

[30 : 07] Isn't that amazing? You know, there are these echoes in the Old Testament. Abraham at one point is called God's friend. Moses at one point is said that he speaks to God face to face as a man speaks with a friend, but those are rare.

Those are exceptions to the rule. Those are Abraham. Those are Moses. And yet here comes Christ tearing the veil in two and saying, I've made you all my friends.

It's not just the privilege of a select few. It's all of us. And what's more, Christ has even given us the Holy Spirit so that we might begin to live in the rich assurance of His unyielding friendship to us.

You remember the words that He spoke? The risen Lord spoke to the disciples as they gathered in Galilee? He says, I'm with you always, even to the end of the age.

Isn't that exactly what we want our friends to say to us? I'm with you always, no matter what comes. And the Holy Spirit's work is to make those words resonate deeper and deeper in our souls so that we might become more and more the kind of people who can become the sort of friends to others that Proverbs talks about.

[31 : 31] One hymn puts it this way, Jesus, what a friend for sinners. Jesus, lover of my soul. Friends may fail me. Foes assail me. He, my Savior, makes me whole.

Hallelujah, what a Savior. Hallelujah, what a friend. Saving, helping, keeping, loving. He is with me to the end.

Brothers and sisters, you have a friend that sticks closer than a brother. A constant, candid, perfectly loving. So now, let us live out that friendship with one another.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we confess that often our friendships are so riddled and so hard. Lord, how much further do we need to go to discover our own brokenness and our own need of redemption than to look at our own friendships and how far short they fall.

And yet, Lord Jesus, we praise you this morning for your kindness and your faithfulness and your steadfast love. Lord, that when we were friendless, when we hated one another and were hated by each other, you entered in to our sin-sick world and our friendless and lonely world and you broke open the gates of friendship.

[33 : 00] Lord, thank you this morning that you know each one of us personally, individually, intimately. Lord, help us to see that.

Help us to know that. Help us to live in the joy of that, that you are a faithful friend. And Lord, help us to be so filled by that and by your spirit that we can become the friends that you call us to be in the church and that our world so desperately needs.

Father, we ask all this in the strong name of Jesus. Amen.