



## Friendships

### Wisdom from Proverbs for Reengaging Relationships

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Good morning. It is truly a privilege to gather with you, the people of God, and to open God's Word together. We are continuing our series in the book of Proverbs which we've called "Social Un-Distancing: Wisdom for Reengaging Relationships." Our desire throughout this series is to bring the wisdom of God's Word to bear on our relationships.

Today we're going to be looking specifically at the relationship of friendship. Friendship is unique among all our relationships, because, as C.S. Lewis says, it is the least natural of loves. Compared to romantic love, neighborly love or familial love, Lewis says friendship is the least instinctive, the least organic, biological and necessary. What he means by this is that without romantic or sexual love, you wouldn't exist. Your parents had to come together in order to make you. Then without family love, you wouldn't have made it to adulthood; it took a lot of loving sacrifice from your parents to get you here. And without neighborly love, you wouldn't be able to survive in the world. We all have to play nice to be able to get along, right? So in this sense, all three loves are necessary.

However, friendship is different. It's not driven by a biological or sociological necessity, which is what makes friendship so very precious. It's entered into deliberately. It's a free choice two people make to love one another. But this doesn't mean friendship is not important. Rather, as we're going to see throughout the book of Proverbs today, good friends are actually necessary if you want to live well and wisely in God's world. That's important, so I want to repeat it: The Bible teaches that good friends are actually necessary if you want to live well and wisely in God's world.

So let's look at these first two Proverbs together: Proverbs 18:1 and 13:20: *"One who isolates himself pursues selfish desires; he rebels against all sound wisdom."* *"The one who walks with the wise will become wise, but a companion of fools will suffer harm."* Do you see what God's Word is saying? If you choose to isolate yourself, to not have friends or not make friends, it will not go well for you. And if you choose the wrong friends, that won't go well for you either. So in order to thrive in this life, you need good and wise friends around you. We're

going to draw out four characteristics of a good friend from the book of Proverbs, then we'll conclude by looking at how we can become better friends.

First, four characteristics of a good friend: good friends are close, good friends are constant, good friends are careful and good friends are candid. These characteristics could also be called the blessings or benefits of friendship. My hope is that as we look at each of these, we will all come to see the importance of pursuing friendship with others. This isn't just something for extroverts or for "people-people." Friendship is a gift from God that we should all be pursuing for our good and joy.

You see, the problem God identified in the Garden of Eden is still true for us today: it is not good for us to be alone (Genesis 2:18). We were made for friendship, not only with God, but with each other as well. However, the problem is we live in a culture that doesn't value friendship as it should. This means we're going to have to work extra hard to cultivate this valuable and precious gift from God.

In my studies this week, I kept coming across three common obstacles to friendship that I think are worth noting. The first is **busyness**. I'm sure you all could have guessed that. We make our lives so busy that we don't have the time to cultivate deep and meaningful friendships with others. So we end up living in a world of surface relationships that are a far cry from the good life of close, meaningful friendships to which God is calling us.

The second obstacle is **technology**. Although technology can certainly be helpful in keeping us connected with one another, if we're not careful, it can also depersonalize our relationships and even pull us away from spending time with the people right there in front of us.

The third obstacle we face is **mobility**. Gone are the days when most people lived in the same area their whole lives. People are regularly moving in and out of our lives, so it doesn't feel like we can even make friends as fast as we're losing friends. This can be discouraging and lead to a "why try" kind of attitude.

Then as if these three obstacles aren't enough, enter COVID. On top of all of this, now the normal ways of connecting with people have changed drastically for us. But if COVID has taught us anything, I think it's that we've learned just how important relationships really are. We do not do well as individuals or even as a society when we are isolated from one another because God made us in His image and as relational beings, it is not good for us to be alone.

So as we go through these four characteristics, or these blessings of friendship, I want to encourage you to be thinking through what will it look like—practically and specifically for you

in 2021—to go about following God’s call to pursue deep, meaningful friendships for your good, growth and joy? Let’s look at these in more detail now.

## **Good friends are close.**

Proverbs 17:17 says, “*A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a difficult time.*” Proverbs 18:24 adds, “*One with many friends may be harmed, but there is a friend who stays closer than a brother.*” So good friends are close.

Notice the last part of Proverbs 18:24, “*...there is a friend who stays closer than a brother.*” This is quite a statement, especially in a culture that highly prioritizes the familial relationship, which is the culture to which Proverbs was written. Here’s the point: Your family has to love you. That’s what families do, right? But your friends...now, that’s different. They choose to love you. They aren’t obligated by blood loyalty to you, yet they choose to be close to you.

Now, of course this doesn’t mean your family members cannot be your friends as well; it’s really wonderful when family members are our friends. But that’s not always the case, right? During this past holiday season, I’ll bet some of you got together with or made phone calls to people you would not necessarily have chosen to be your friends. They’re your family, you love them and care about them, but they aren’t your friends. That’s because friendship love is different from familial love. Friendship love is freely given. It’s voluntary. It can’t be forced. Rather, it actually has to be discovered.

C.S. Lewis, in his famous essay on friendship, describes it like this:

Friendship arises out of mere companionship, when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which until that moment each believe to be his own unique treasure or burden. The typical expression of opening friendship would be something like this: “What? You too? I thought I was the only one!” And a friendship is born.

Lewis is saying that acquaintances become friends when they discover they share a common love or a common interest. We all intuitively know this, don’t we? There are some people we click with and some we don’t. That doesn’t mean the people we don’t click with are bad or that there’s something wrong with them or with us. It just means there isn’t a commonality of passion that is the foundation of all true friendship. This is why friendships—especially true and close friendships—are so rare but so precious.

Look again at Proverbs 18:24: *“One with many friends may be harmed, but there is a friend who stays closer than a brother.”* Notice there are two different types of friends talked about in this verse. The first type is more of an acquaintance or a companion. The ESV translates this verse, *“A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”*

You see, we all have a lot of companions in our lives—people we know and who know us—and these people are often friendly toward us and we toward them. But they aren’t like the friend described in Lewis’ next line, are they? That friend is rare and precious. He is a true friend who sticks closer than a brother. So this verse is talking about the importance of having a very close friend.

This raises the question about the danger of a cliquy exclusivity. Does this understanding of the importance of having a few very close friends go against the Bible’s command for us to love everyone? Jesus didn’t seem to think so. Jesus perfectly loved everyone around Him, but that didn’t mean He didn’t have an inner circle of friends. Although Jesus loved the crowds and ministered faithfully to them, He chose 12 disciples to pour Himself into. Even within those 12, there were three in particular whom He was especially close to: Peter, James and John.

I think Jesus is a perfect model for us. Jesus loved the crowds, but He also made time to go deep with His disciples, to share His heart with them talk openly and honestly with them. This is how our friendships should work as well. As finite humans, we cannot go deep with everyone. We do not have the relational or emotional capacity to do that, let alone the time—and that’s okay. This is why it’s so important for us to be friendly to everyone, but to enjoy close friendships with a few.

So what does this look like practically? I would suggest that Sunday morning presents a great opportunity to be friendly toward everyone. Be warm and welcoming to each other. Look for those who may be feeling a little lonely or isolated, doing your best to love them. But save your more intimate conversations with a close friend for another time—maybe a lunch during the week or a phone call—when you have the time to really go deep with one another and encourage one another in your relationship with Christ.

This will take intentionality and effort on your part, but it’s worth it. Don’t let busyness get in the way of pursuing these close relationships. If you’re looking for a place to start, I’d encourage you to check out some of the ministries we have. Our men’s SPUR ministry is having a breakfast next week. Or our women’s Bible studies, or our gospel communities, or many of the

other ministries we have going—all of these are great places to start engaging with others and seeing if the Lord in His kindness will help you discover a friendship you can cultivate for many years to come. In our day and age, there will always be something else to do—so prioritize discovering and cultivating close friendships with others.

## **Good friends are constant.**

We've seen that good friends are close. There is an intimacy and love that characterizes a close friendship. Second, we see that good friends are constant. They stick with you through thick and thin and everything in between. Look again at these same two Proverbs: "*A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a difficult time*" (Proverbs 17:17). "*One with many friends may be harmed, but there is a friend who stays closer than a brother*" (18:24).

Many people have observed that when they have gone through difficulty, they have learned who their true friends are. Maybe you've felt the sting of betrayal as someone who you thought was a friend turned their back on you when you needed them most. Sadly, there are a lot of fair-weather friends out there—friends who are only in it for themselves. Proverbs 19:4 and 6-7 is honest about this:

*Wealth attracts many friends, but a poor person is separated from his friend...and everyone is a friend of one who gives gifts. All the brothers of a poor person hate him; how much more do his friends keep their distance from him! He may pursue them with words, but they are not there.*

They're not there. What a sad picture. When he needs them most, his friends are not there for him. They have abandoned him and shown they were really only in the relationship for themselves, for what they could get out of it. They didn't love their friend; they loved what their friend provided for them. They were consumer friends, not constant friends.

This is why the more wealth or power you have, the harder it is to know who your true friends really are. However, good friends—true and faithful friends—love at all times. That's what Proverbs 17:17 is saying. It does not matter what is going on in your life, a true friend is there for you. They are there in the good times, the hard times and the ordinary times. There is a constancy, a loyalty, to their friendship with you.

This constancy and loyalty are seen in Proverbs 18:24: "*One with many friends may be harmed, but there is a friend who stays closer than a brother.*" Do you see what this Proverb is teaching? Someone with many so-called friends may come to ruin, but a true friend, a loyal

friend, will not let that happen. They will stick with you even when the going gets tough. Even when it costs them dearly, they will not forsake you.

This type of friend is so rare and so precious because they're showing you that they love you, not for what they can get out of the relationship. You are not just a means to an end for them; you are the end. You are what they love.

So in Proverbs 27:10 we are told, *"Don't abandon your friend or your father's friend."* The Bible is calling us to give the same loyalty, the same constancy, that we would want out of a relationship. This is because, as Drew Hunter says, "No friendship can last without loyalty." Though friendships are entered into voluntarily, this does not mean they can be exited at will. There is to be a constancy, a steadiness, a faithfulness that characterizes the relationship.

We all want this kind of relationship, don't we? But my question today is are we willing to give this kind of loyalty to others? Are you a friend who loves at all times? What lengths are you willing to go to for your friends?

## **Good friends are careful.**

We've seen that good friends are close—they love one another—and good friends are constant—they are loyal to one another. Let's look at our third characteristic of a good friend, which is careful. Good friends are careful.

In order to see this one, we're going to look at a few Proverbs that describe careless, not careful, friends. The first one is Proverbs 26:18-19: *"Like a madman who throws flaming darts and deadly arrows, so is the person who deceives his neighbor and says, 'I was only joking!'"* Here we see someone who doesn't understand his friend. He's oblivious to how his jokes are affecting him. Instead of building up the relationship through humor, this guy is just tearing it down. He's like a madman, running around throwing flaming darts and deadly arrows all willy-nilly; he's giving no thought to how his words are being received. He's completely unaware of how he is wounding his friend. This shows he is not really a true friend, because a true friend knows you. She knows what you like and don't like, what you find funny or not funny, and she's sensitive to that. She's aware of that.

Let's look at another Proverb about a careless friend—Proverbs 27:14: *"If one blesses his neighbor with a loud voice early in the morning, it will be counted as a curse to him."*

Again we see a picture of someone who is emotionally disconnected from their friend. This person doesn't even realize their friend is not a morning person. So what do they do? They call them at 6:00 a.m. to be the first one to wish them "Happy birthday," thinking they're being

sweet and intentional when actually it's having the opposite effect. They're just proving they don't really know their friend all that well. Far better to be the friend who comes over around lunch time with donuts and coffee. That's the friend you want.

This is because good friends know one another; they care about one another. They take an interest in each other and want to learn more about the other person. They want to know, "What are your hopes and dreams? What are your fears and uncertainties? What do you love? What do you hate?" These things are learned by being close to each other, by taking a genuine interest in the other person, by being constant with each other through the ups and downs of life. Over time, you begin to learn what makes each other tick and the relationship is strengthened as a result.

Let's look at just one more—and this one is really important to pay attention to. Proverbs 25:20 says this: "*Singing songs to a troubled heart is like taking off clothing on a cold day or like pouring vinegar on soda.*" Here we see the height of emotional and relational disconnect. The person described in this verse is so unaware, so oblivious, to what is going on in his friend's heart, that he wants to party when his friend only feels like crying. His friend's heart is troubled. It's weighed down and burdened, but he's not aware of that, so he only wants to sing songs.

In this contrast, we learn something absolutely beautiful about friendship. True friends cannot be happy when you are sad. Why? Because in friendship, you give the gift of emotional connection. You choose to tie your happiness up in your friend's happiness. You cannot be happy when they are not happy. Another word for this is empathy. Empathy means the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. It's the ability to enter into their world and see things through their eyes, to feel their pain, to celebrate in their joy.

Drew Hunter describes it like this:

Over time we learn our friend's temperaments, their moods and their buttons. We know what makes them tick and what ticks them off. This all informs how we relate to them. We pick up on our friend's emotional state and we adapt to it. As we do this, consideration serves as a primary way we bear our friend's burdens. An empathetic presence lightens our friend's load. Troubles drop down like Tetris blocks. Some of them pile up on our friend's back, but one well-placed empathetic word can slide in and clear half the load.

Hunter goes on and calls friendship "the relationship that halves our sorrows and doubles our joys." I love that. "Friendship is the relationship that halves our sorrows and doubles our joys." Through their presence and thoughtful, timely words, friends can enter into

our sorrows and help lighten the load. They've taken the time to truly get to know us, to understand what helps and what hurts, so they can be there for us in our times of need.

Friends don't only halve our sorrows; they can also double our joys, right? Have you ever noticed that when you laugh, you often look around at the people around you? When something is really fun or enjoyable for you, you just have to share it with others. That's because our joy is maximized when we share it with others.

Earlier this week, I hope you noticed that the trees were painted in the most beautiful ice I've ever seen. It was absolutely stunning. I wasn't content with just looking at it by myself. I had to share it with my friend in Texas, because they don't get snow like that down there. So I took pictures—I even took videos—and sent them to him. When he responded with amazement at it, my joy was doubled.

That's because, as one author wisely says, "A joy unshared is a joy unfulfilled, and a joy shared is a joy doubled." You see, it was in the sharing of the joy with my friend that my joy was doubled. Not only was I enjoying the beauty of God's creation, my friend was as well, then we were both enjoying each other's enjoyment of it together. It was just wonderful.

That's what friendship can do. It can halve our sorrows and double our joys. That's the third characteristic of friendship: good friends are careful. They take time to know and understand you, empathizing with you in your sorrows and joys.

## **Good friends are candid.**

Now, our final characteristic of a good friend is candor. Good friends are not only careful, they are also candid with one another. Look at Proverbs 27:5-6. This is a fun one. *"Better an open reprimand than concealed love. The wounds of a friend are trustworthy, but the kisses of an enemy are excessive."*

The point here is that good friends love each other enough to say hard things to each other when needed. I love how Oscar Wilde put it: "A true friend stabs you in the front." She doesn't go around talking about you behind your back. She loves you enough to say it to your face, because it's love that drives the wounds a friend must inflict.

This isn't how we normally think, is it? We often think, "I love that person too much to say something that will hurt them." But what these Proverbs are saying is that this is actually concealing love. This is hiding and suppressing love. It's like the kisses of an enemy. In reality, what you're actually saying is, "I love myself too much to go through that. I'm not willing to risk my relationship with you in order to help you." It's actually selfish instead of loving. This is why

a friend—a true friend, a good friend—is willing to stab you in the front, but to do so carefully and in the context of a close and constant friendship.

Tim Keller brings these characteristics of a good friend together beautifully when he says this: “Candor is telling the truth, but carefulness means I’m so emotionally connected with you that the painful words I’m going to tell you are going to create pain for me as well.” Remember, part of being a good friend is hurting when your friend hurts. Keller goes on to say:

This is the reason why it’s so hard to be a friend. You can either be careful and just shut up and never say anything, or you can be candid and just not care at all. Either of those ways aren’t painful. But to be a friend is constant pain, because you have to be careful and candid and consistent.

True friends love one another well enough to say the hard things, but to do so carefully, with gentleness and compassion and love.

In the next couple weeks we’ll be looking a little bit more at how to use our words in relationships. What I want to do now is pivot and address something that maybe some of you are feeling right now.

Think back over the list of characteristics of a good friend. A true friend is someone who is close, who loves you and cares about you, someone who is constant, who is always there for you and never leaves you or forsakes you, no matter how hard things. It’s someone who is careful, who has taken the time to really get to know you, to understand what makes you tick and who can empathize with you in your joys and sorrows. It’s someone who loves you enough to be candid with you, to tell you the truth for your good and growth.

As you think back over this list, I imagine you are feeling some of the same things I’m feeling. First, I’m feeling a strong desire to have a friend like that. I want a friend who is close, constant, careful and candid with me. I can see how wonderful and helpful that would be, so my heart longs for that. Who wouldn’t want a friend like that? However, I’m also feeling deeply discouraged. When I take an honest look at my relationships, I realize I’m not the ideal friend. I don’t always love others faithfully. More often than not, my selfishness gets mixed up in my love for others. I’m inconsiderate or too self-protecting.

The sad reality is, as Tim Keller pointedly says, the reason why we don’t have enough great friends is because we are not great friends. So how can we become better friends? How can we grow in this area? Well, the Bible’s answer is to be befriended by Jesus, the greatest Friend of all. In John 15:12-13, Jesus says, *“This is my command: Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends.”*

In that statement, Jesus brought all the beauty of the gospel into the context of friendship. Jesus came to lay His life for His friends, so that you and I can become His friends. Jesus loves you so much and wanted to be close to you so badly that He was willing to lay down His very life for you. Jesus has promised all of His friends that He will never, ever leave them or forsake them (Hebrews 13:5). He also clearly stated that there is absolutely nothing that can separate them from His deep, deep love for them (Romans 8:38-39).

Jesus willingly came to this earth to become one of us, so that He could faithfully empathize with us. Jesus became a man so He could understand our deepest struggles and joys, then be able to deal patiently, gently and carefully with us. Jesus does not get upset or turned off by our weaknesses and quirks. He loves us and speaks to us with words full of grace and truth, full of carefulness and candor.

Jesus is the true friend our hearts long for and is inviting you to find in Him the Friend you've always wanted—the Friend your heart most desires. When you have Jesus as your Friend, you're freed from having to look to the people around you for all of your relational needs, which puts way too much pressure on those friendships and ends up hurting them. You can rest safe and secure in Jesus' love and acceptance of you, which enables you to become a better friend to those around you.

This is what's so amazing about friendship with Jesus—the more you hang out with Him, He starts to rub off on you. Then slowly but surely, safe in His love, you start to become a better friend to those around you, since you're becoming more and more like the best Friend you could ever have—Jesus.

Let's pray together.

Jesus, thank You that You are the Friend of sinners like us. Thank You that even though we had done nothing to deserve Your friendship, You loved us so much that You were willing to lay down Your very life for us so that we could become Your friends. Help us now to be more like You in our friendships with others. In Your name we pray. Amen.

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