

Wisdom for Life: Stick Close to Your Friends

Proverbs 18:24 (17:17; 27:6, 9, 17)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on May 10, 2020

Introduction

- ❖ As we've been enduring, over the last two months, this strange season of separation and social distancing, I think many of us are coming to realize just how precious friendship can be. In normal times and in the busyness of our normal routines, it's easy to take our friends for granted or to feel little practical need for them. **But when we've been isolated for so long, we quickly realize how having faithful friends in your life is a Godsend.**
 - Sometimes it takes a tragedy or an emergency – or a historic global pandemic – to remind us of how much we need true friends. I'm talking about friends who are willing to brave a grocery run for you – or even a trip to Costco! Or friends who check up on you when you're sick and send you encouraging texts filled with scriptures and prayers. Or friends who use their gifts to cook or bake or sew masks and then deliver these gifts to your door. Or friends who rally together to raise the necessary funds you need to begin a life-saving cancer treatment – all in a matter of days. **I think it's amazing how, in our church, we've seen the power and the preciousness of friendship on display.**

- ❖ As we continue in our study of Proverbs, we're going to talk about friendship. The Bible actually has a lot to say about the subject, especially Proverbs. **The main idea is that – a true friend is a true blessing that you should never take for granted and never neglect to invest in.** Friends are there to bear your burdens; to pick you up when you're down; to challenge you and push you; to be there for you when things go wrong.

- ❖ You might be surprised at how often ancient writers liked to talk about friendship. We obviously have the wisdom of King Solomon here in Proverbs. But outside of Scripture, probably the best known ancient teaching on friendship comes from Aristotle.
 - **To the Greek philosopher, friendship was one of the highest ethical goods.** For many ancient thinkers, the relationship between true friends was considered more virtuous than the relationship between two lovers or between parent and child.

- ❖ In his book *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis addresses this high regard that the ancients had for friendship. **And speaking into the purely naturalistic, Darwinian worldview of his day, he explains that friendship is so virtuous – because it is so unnecessary.** It has no “survival value”. You can survive and breed without friends.
 - You need romantic love (*eros*) to help you breed. And you need affection or familial love (*storge*) if you're going to survive as a newborn. You can observe the same kind of relationships within the animal kingdom. It's necessary for survival.

- ❖ But friendship is what sets us apart from the animals. **As humans, we give ourselves to friendship – even at great cost to ourselves – even though friendship has no survival value.** The point is that friendship is not an animalistic instinct. No, friendship – our desire for friends and our ability to be a friend – is part of the *imago dei*, the image of God imprinted on the human soul.

- **When we experience friendship – and give ourselves as a friend to another – we are reflecting God’s image.** For even within himself – between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit – there is true friendship. It is a God-like virtue to be a friend.
- ❖ **This is why Lewis said that even though friendship has no survival value – it gives value to survival.** Without friends in our lives, we would live an animal existence. We are merely surviving. But if you want to thrive and experience the fullness of what it means to be a creature made in the image of God – then you need to pursue and value true friendships.
 - **But sadly, we live in a day and age where friendship has been trivialized – to the extent that we don’t know anymore what it means to have friends.** We have hundreds to thousands of friends on Facebook, but what does that even mean anymore? How many true friends do we really have?
 - What I’d like to do this morning is to consider a few Proverbs that offer ancient wisdom on friendship. **We’re going to look at three characteristics of true friendship**, which I hope will help you detect how many true friends are really in your life. We’re going to see that true friendship is characterized by *commitment*, by *commonality*, and by *candor*.

Commitment

- ❖ The first characteristic of true friendship that we’re going to consider is commitment. **True friends are committed to one another.** Loyal to each other. Through ups and downs. Through thick and thin. They stick together.
 - Listen to Proverbs 18:24, “*A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.*” This is a contrast being made between companions (fair-weather friends) and true friends. **The point is that the loyalty of one true friend is of far greater worth than the company of many companions.**
- ❖ **How many stories or shows have tried to teach us this lesson?** Typically, there’s a young male or female protagonist who longs to be popular, so much so that (let’s say it’s a girl) she neglects her long-time friend as she ingratiate herself with the popular kids. As the story continues, she wins their acceptance and considers herself happy, but a problem arises and she’s about to come to ruin; her fair-weather friends abandon her; but her one true friend shows up and proves faithful in the end. And the lesson is – **the value of one true friend far outweighs the company of a hundred companions.**
- ❖ **When problems arise, when trouble comes, when ruin is on the horizon – all you want and all you need is one true friend.** Mere companions are unreliable. Listen to **Proverbs 25:19**, “*Trusting in a treacherous man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth or a foot that slips.*” When you’ve got a bad tooth, you can’t use it to bite down. It might look good when you smile. When things are going well, that friendship looks great. But when you really need that tooth to do its real job – to bite down and chew – it’s unreliable. It can’t help you.

- ❖ Listen to another ancient source of wisdom. The *Wisdom of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)* is a non-biblical book in the Apocrypha. It doesn't have any inspired revelation, but there's some helpful wisdom in it. There's a proverb that says, "*There are friends who sit at your table, but they will not stand by you in times of trouble.*" (Sirach 6:10)
 - That sounds like Proverbs 18:24. There are plenty of companions (fair-weather friends) who would gladly dine at your table and share in the benefits of your friendship. But when you need them in times of trouble, they're nowhere to be found.
 - **That's a lesson we all need to take to heart, especially those of us drawn to the idea of being popular or being in the in-crowd.** It's a fleeting goal. Even if you obtain to that level of popularity, what good is it, in the end, to have many companions and lots of acquaintances – but no true friends?

- ❖ **The wisdom of Proverbs tells you to take that energy you'll spend chasing popularity – and redirect it towards a fewer number of true friendships.** V24 goes on to say that when looking for friends, look for those who stick "*closer than a brother.*" **That's how you can identify a true friend – their loyalty runs thicker than blood; deeper than family.**
 - Sure, family members can be there for you in times of trouble. But sometimes it's only because you're related. They can't erase or deny the fact that you're related and with that comes a degree of duty. They have to be there for you – they're family.
 - **But a friend chooses to be there for you. A friend has no duty or binding obligation.** No blood ties. That's why a true friend sticks closer than a brother or any other family member.

- ❖ Think of **Naomi and Ruth**. Ruth was her daughter-in-law. They *were* family, but now Ruth is a widow. Naomi's son had died, and she released Ruth from any familial obligations. Naomi was planning to return to Bethlehem with no husband, no children, and no prospects. It was a time of trouble. That's what makes Ruth's loyalty to Naomi that much more virtuous.
 - Listen to **Ruth 1:16-17**, "¹⁶*But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. ¹⁷Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."* That was spoken – not out of a sense of duty – but out of true friendship. She stuck closer than a daughter-in-law (like Orpah).

- ❖ Or picture the friendship between **David and Jonathan**. In **1 Samuel 18:1** we read that "*the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.*" I realize that kind of description of friendship between two men sounds strange to modern ears. Many would assume something homo-erotic between David and Jonathan.
 - But there's no biblical support for such a claim. **It just reveals how much modern society has no place for true friendship.** We've lost the category of *philia* love between two friends. Now we just view every love relationship through the lens of romantic or erotic love. That's a tragic loss – when a society no longer recognizes nor celebrates brotherly love between true friends.

- ❖ That's what Tolkien (a friend of Lewis) was concerned about. When he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*, he included many heroic figures. There were mighty warriors, wise wizards, graceful elves, and rightful kings. But of all the characters that he created, Tolkien said, years later, that his most heroic was Samwise Gamgee.
 - **Sam epitomizes the virtues of true friendship.** His single-minded loyalty to Frodo is there from start to finish. At every point that Frodo seeks to go at it alone, Sam refuses to leave his side. He's a living illustration of **Proverbs 17:17**, "*A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.*"

- ❖ **The constancy of Sam's friendship to Frodo and its true worth is most clearly on display at the end of their journey – when they face their greatest adversity in the heart of Mordor.** At the end, Frodo falters, but Sam stays true. If it wasn't for Sam's love for Frodo, their task most certainly would've failed and evil would've prevailed. So even though Frodo is the story's main protagonist. **But as Tolkien admitted, Sam is its most heroic figure.** He exemplifies the constancy and commitment found only in the truest of friendships.

- ❖ But whether it's Frodo and Sam, Naomi and Ruth, David and Jonathan – all of these literary examples of friendship are meant to prepare us to encounter the truest Friend of all, found in the Four Gospels. **Having a true friend whose loyalty and commitment runs deeper than blood relations is fully realized for us in Christ Jesus.**
 - In John 15:13, we read Jesus say this to his disciples, "¹³Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends."

- ❖ Jesus is Lord. He is Master. But to those for whom he laid down his own life – to pay our debt, to satisfy the justice and wrath of God, to break us free from the power of sin – he did all that for his friends. **If you've trusted in Jesus, he is your Redeemer and Friend. And the truest Friend you'll have.**
 - You don't need a whole company of saviors – you just need One. One who sticks closer than a brother. One who will never leave nor forsake you (Heb 13:5). One who will be with you always to the end of the age (Mt 28:20).

- ❖ **The takeaway is to give up your attempts to curate a long list of followers, fans, and Facebook friends.** We care too much about our social media following – when most of them turn out to be fair-weathered friends who won't be there for you in times of trouble. Instead, invest that time and energy you would've spent online – first, in your relationship with Christ and then in your relationships with a few true friends.
 - Ask yourself this: **How can I be a true friend? How can I, in this coming week, demonstrate my commitment (my loyalty) to a true friend in my life?** Can I serve them? Can I care for them? Can I help bear their burden? Make it a goal to be a true friend to someone this week.

Commonality

- ❖ So that's one of the key characteristics of true friendship – commitment. Now let's consider a second: **True friendships are based on some kind of commonality.** There's always something that binds two or more friends together. Some common interest or passion or mission. That commonality is what makes a friendship work – and what makes a friendship so sweet and pleasing. **What you have to understand is that the sweetness of true friendship is not something you make or manufacture – it's something discovered.**

- ❖ Listen to **Proverbs 27:9**, “*Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel.*” This proverb acknowledges the sweetness of a true friendship. Now it's important – whenever we study Scripture – to do our best to situate ourselves in the historic context of the original author and audience. So keep in mind that, in ancient times, sweetness was not something you manufactured – but something you discovered. You couldn't artificially sweeten your meal. You had to discover foods that were naturally sweet and add them into your meal.
 - **So, the point here is that the sweetness of a friendship begins with discovery.** You don't make a friend. You discover a friend. You discover that you're passionate about the same thing – and that becomes the base of a budding friendship.

- ❖ Aristotle wrote about this. Lewis expanded on this. **They explained that the virtue of friendship lies in the fact that, by its nature, friendship is oriented away from the self.** It's not self-centered. When you're spending time with a true friend, you're not thinking about yourself – you're not even thinking about the friendship.
 - **Lovers, on the other hand, are always thinking about themselves and talking about their feelings for each other.** Lovers are always evaluating and defining their relationship. I'm not saying that's wrong or bad. That's just the nature of romantic love (*eros*). It's oriented towards the relationship and our feelings for each other.

- ❖ **Lewis says that lovers stand face to face – focused on each other. But friends stand side by side – focused on the very thing that brings them together.** A true friendship is oriented around a common interest, a shared passion, a collective goal. According to Lewis, a friendship is born “*at that moment when one person says to another: ‘What! You too? I thought I was the only one.’*”

- ❖ Unlike lovers, friends don't set out to find each other. You don't make friends by looking for a friend. **No, you make friends by pursuing some interest or passion or mission in life – and then you look around and discover others who share that in common.** “What? You too? I thought I was the only one! What a blessing to find a friend to help me along the way.”
 - Lovers are always asking each other, “Do you love me?” But friends ask each other, “Do you see the same truth – the same vision of reality? Do you love it as much as I do? **Now that commonality can be something as worldly as a shared fandom for the same sports team or something as spiritual as a shared faith in the same Lord and Savior.**

- ❖ Regardless of what that commonality is – when you discover someone with that shared love – it makes for a great friendship. It becomes the basis of a sweet friendship that can truly enhance your life.
 - That’s what we mean when we say that friendship begins with discovery. **You don’t manufacture friendships. You discover them by focusing *beyond them*.** To something greater than you – something greater than the friendship.

- ❖ This is what makes a Christian friendship so unique. The commonality that binds you to another Christian can be a number of things. You might share the same culture, have the same upbringing, be of the same profession, attend the same school, share the same hobbies – **but most fundamentally, you’re friends because you share the same faith and follow the same Lord.** A true friend in Christ is someone who is also focused on something greater than the two of you. The two of you are focused on following Christ – and now you discover the sweet blessing of a friend to help you along the way.
 - **And the sweetest and most powerful of Christian friendships are the ones that lack any other common bond of affinity between the individuals – except for that shared faith in a common Lord.** If you’ve experienced that kind of friendship before – where the two of you would’ve never been friends *but for* your shared love of Jesus – then you know how sweet and God-glorifying friendship can be!

- ❖ **I want you to think about the Christian friendships in your life. Have you been investing in them – or neglecting them?** I want to speak to the teenagers among us in particular. You’re in a stage of life (or entering one) where you’re discovering new friendships that could come and go – but some could very well last a lifetime.
 - Many of the adults in our church would tell you that some of our closest friendships to this day – were forged back in high school or in college. **So, you’re in an important season of life where you need to choose your friends wisely.** The friendships you establish now could very well shape your future – for good or ill.

- ❖ But the point I’m making here is that you don’t choose your friends wisely by making a list of what to look for in a friend. **You don’t start out by pursuing friendship. Proverbs would tell you – start out by pursuing wisdom.**
 - **Focus on living a life that fears the Lord; that loves his gospel; that submits to his Word; that strives to be faithful in all things.** And then look around to discover who is on the same path of wisdom with you – focused on the same things. That’s how you make good Christian friends that could last a lifetime.

- ❖ Now I’m not saying all your friends need to be Christians. That wouldn’t be healthy if that were the case. **But every believer needs the friendship of a fellow follower of Jesus.** Because these friendships are designed for getting you through times of trouble and adversity. They’re based on something solid, something unchanging, something eternal. They’re based on God – so you can count on those friends at all times and in every situation.

Candor

- ❖ So commitment and commonality – those are two characteristics of true friendship. Here is a third that we find in Proverbs: **A true friendship is marked by candor.** By a willingness to speak the truth to each other in love. A true friend is not going to just flatter you or always agree with you. A true friend is going to challenge you at times – in order to sharpen you.
- ❖ Listen to **Proverbs 27:17**, “*Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.*” That’s what friends do for each other. We sharpen each other. We make each other better when we’re in each other’s lives.
 - But think about it. **When iron sharpens iron, it creates friction. Sparks are going to fly.** It might get heated. The words of a friend might hurt. But that’s because sometimes the truth hurts. But if the truth is delivered in the context of a true friendship – it might inflict a faithful wound.
- ❖ Listen to **Proverbs 27:6**, “*Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.*” So enemies are the ones who merely flatter – because they’re after selfish gain. A faithful friend might speak words that wound you – but ironically they’re designed to heal you. **In other words, their words might hurt you, but they’re not meant to harm you.**
 - There is a difference. If you can’t tell the difference – that not all words that hurt are intended to harm – then you’ll be stuck in a sad state. **If you interpret everything that hurts you as something meant to harm you – then you’ll never grow.**
 - You’ll continue severing friendships with those who only want to faithfully wound you, and you’ll just surround yourself with those who kiss and flatter you with sweet nothings. Sure, your feelings will be safe and intact, but you’ll be stunted in your spiritual growth. And lonelier than you ever imagined.
- ❖ I have a long-time friend who can be so blunt at times. I feel like he has little tact. But he does have wisdom. And I know he also loves me as a true friend. So, even though at times I get annoyed with his responses and wish he’d keep his opinions to himself. **Usually, when I look back and reconsider his words – I can recognize truth in what he said and why he said it. It’s a wound that hurts – but it’s also a faithful wound that heals.**
- ❖ Do you have friends like that in your life? **Is there a true friend in your life who can give you a faithful wound?** If not – if you haven’t found a friend like that – if you’re still looking for someone to play that role because so far no one has been wise enough or godly enough or faithful enough – then maybe, could it be, that the problem is *you*?
 - **Could it be that you haven’t allowed anyone to get close enough to say anything that might wound you – because of fear?** Fear – that they’ll find out you’re a fraud. Or fear – that they’ll discover something about you they don’t like and end up rejecting you.

- ❖ I understand why you're afraid to let people in. Hesitant to let them sharpen you. **But that's when you've got to look to Jesus, your truest friend.** See how Jesus knows you better than you know yourself. **He knows every shameful secret, every humiliating failure, every moral flaw – and yet he chooses to love you still.**
 - It's not his duty. He's under no obligation. And yet, out of the freeness of his grace, Jesus calls you friend. He chose to love you with that greater love that lays down his life for a friend (Jn 15:13).

- ❖ If you believe this – if you know, with ever increasing assurance, that he was pierced for your transgressions; crushed for your iniquities; that upon him was the chastisement that brought you peace; and that *by his wounds* – you were healed (Isa 53:5) – that's when you can handle the faithful wounds of a true friend.
 - That's how the love and acceptance of Christ changes you. **If your truest Friend who not only knows you the best but knows the worst about you – can still love you and stick closer than a brother – then you can handle the deepest wounds of any other friend.** And you'll start to see how those words your friends speak are intended – not to harm – but to heal you and grow you.

- ❖ Friends, what needs to change in your life? Do you need to be a truer friend? **Is there someone that you care about, but you've been too afraid to wound with the truth?** Maybe you need to give someone a faithful wound this week. You'll need a lot of prayer and maybe wise counsel before you do so.
 - **Or perhaps you need to step out in faith and invite a true friend to speak God's truth in love into your life – and to wound you if necessary.** You'll also need a lot of prayer, asking for humility to receive God's truth, even if it hurts. Whatever you do, do so knowing in Christ you have the love and acceptance of the truest of Friends.