

First Baptist Church Merritt Island
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SCHOOL OF WISDOM – Life Lessons from Proverbs
God's Wisdom for Friendship
Proverbs 17:7-17

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In 2010, a landmark study was conducted that reviewed and analyzed various health factors among 3.4 million people from a cross-section of nations and socio-economic backgrounds. The findings of that study set off alarm bells within the medical community. They discovered a condition that was connected to a 29% greater risk for heart disease, a 32% higher risk of stroke, and a 50% higher risk of dementia in older adults.

Subsequent studies confirmed that the health of people around the globe is being put at significant risk because of this one, particular condition. So much so that in July of this year, the World Health Organization declared it to be a global public health concern that is connected to 871,000 deaths a year or roughly 100 people every hour.

What is the condition? Loneliness. We are living in a global epidemic of loneliness. People of every age and stage of life are lonely. The highest rate of loneliness is among young people, ages 19-29. One of the primary factors that contribute to this epidemic is the influence of technology.

Increased activity on social media is causing a decrease in social interactions. In an age when the world had never been more connected by technology, the people of the world have never felt more disconnected from one another.

It's as though we picked up our phones and set aside our friends. Simply put, people are starving for true friendship.

And if you know the Bible, that shouldn't surprise you. When God created Adam, He said it is not good for man to be alone. We are designed for relationship. So, if we want to know what it means to be a good friend and to cultivate healthy friendships, then we need to listen to the wisdom of God. And that brings us back to the book of Proverbs. Over the last month or so, we have been studying the wisdom of God found in the book of Proverbs. And one of the dominant themes in this book is friendship. God offers us His wisdom about friendship.

Proverbs 13:20

Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.

This verse emphasizes the influence our friends have on our lives. If you choose to be friends with wise people, you will become wise through their influence on you. If you choose to be friends with fools, you will suffer the effects of their foolishness. Friends are deeply influential.

That echoes the words of Paul in *1 Corinthians 15:33 Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."* Friends are influential. So, wise people choose their friends carefully.

Proverbs 12:26

One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.

The first part of verse 26 has a phrase that is really difficult to translate from Hebrew to English. The word “neighbor” is another word for “friend.” The word “guide” is a word that means “to make an investigation or to do reconnaissance.” So, it literally is saying that a righteous man does an investigation of those close to him. That means we should Google background checks on our buddies, just kidding. Listen to the way the New International Version translates this verse.

Proverbs 12:26

The righteous choose their friends carefully, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.

Godly people are careful in the way they choose a friend. They give careful consideration to the people they surround themselves with. Wise people form healthy friendships.

When you put this together with Proverbs 13:20, you get an important wisdom principle concerning friendship: Friends influence us deeply so we should choose them carefully. And that gives us our Big Idea for today.

Big Idea: Because we are deeply influenced by friendship, we should pursue having and being healthy friends.

Your quality of life is directly connected to the quality of your friends. But what makes a friendship healthy? What does it take to be a healthy friend?

In the time we have together, I want to share 6 characteristics of healthy friends from the wisdom of God in Proverbs. And, as we walk through these, I want to encourage you to ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate these truths in a way that reveals the kind of friend you are and the kind of friends you have. Examine the state of your friendships and commit to pursue healthy dynamics as though your quality of life depends on it...because, in many ways, it does.

CHARACTERISTIC #1 – HEALTHY FRIENDS VALUE QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

Proverbs 18:24

A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

This proverb is contrasting two types of friendship. One type of friendship seeks to be friends with lots of people. But those friendships don't go deep. We might call them friends, but they are really companions or acquaintances. They exist on a more superficial level than a true friend. On the other hand, there is a kind of friendship that is often closer than family. It sticks. In good times and bad. The point is clear: invest your energy into building deep, long-term friendships with a few people rather than spreading yourself thin trying to maintain lots of superficial relationships. If you try to be a close friend to everyone then you likely won't be a deep friend to anyone.

LEGOS – we all have a finite number of connecting points

Now, don't take this the wrong way. We are called to love everyone. We are called to be kind and hospitable to everyone. We are called to encourage and lift up as many people as we are able to encounter on a daily basis. It's good to consider your coworkers and classmates your friends. So, this isn't a call to shut yourself off from everyone but a tiny, select group of people who are part of your social clique. At the same time, there is a simple reality – you can't go deep with many people. So, you have to make an intentional choice and commitment to go deep with a select few. Your spouse and closest friends should occupy a special place in your day-to-day life.

Jesus modeled this for us during His earthly ministry. He ministered in love to the multitudes, but He had a circle of 12 that He related to in a special way. And within that 12, there were 3 (Peter, James, and John) who formed an inner circle and shared the deepest places and most intimate experiences of Christ's life on earth.

There's a phrase we use around here that represents this dynamic: Make Church Smaller. We recognize that we aren't able to build deep relationships with lots of people in this big room. Our small groups provide great community and help you form a support network of people who can encourage you and rally around you during hard times. They represent an environment to study the Bible in a very personal, interactive way. But even our small groups are often too large to really go deep into each others' lives on a regular basis. But, if we will come to this room or be part of a small group with the intention of finding one or two people to invite into our lives and build close, personal relationships with, then we can experience the power of godly friendship and reap the benefits of that in our lives.

Healthy friends value quality over quantity.

CHARACTERISTIC #2 – HEALTHY FRIENDS DON'T GOSSIP

Proverbs 17:9

Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.

Proverbs 16:28

A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends.

Proverbs 20:19

Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a simple babblers.

Healthy friendship isn't a hotbed of gossip. A healthy friend isn't someone we feel comfortable bashing other people with or tearing down other people with. Gossip is toxic and friendships that are marked by gossip are toxic relationships that don't honor God and don't bless people – including the people in those friendships.

We don't have time to go too far down this road, but the three verses we just read provide a lot of insight into what qualifies as gossip.

- Gossip is speech that isn't motivated by genuine love for the people we are talking about or the people we are talking to.
- Gossip is used to stir up strife – to get people worked up - rather than bringing peace.
- Gossip is whispering talk. It normally happens in side conversations. It stops quickly when someone walks up who isn't a gossip or who is part of the dynamic you're talking about.
- Gossip is a tool that separates people rather than bring people together.

Gossip tells secrets or sensitive matters just so babblers can feel like they have something to say. The way to put a stop to gossip is to refuse to participate in it – as the one who is speaking or the one who is listening. Even better, confront it and call it out as it's happening. That actually ties in with the next characteristic of healthy friendship.

CHARACTERISTIC #3 – HEALTHY FRIENDS HOLD EACH OTHER ACCOUNTABLE

Proverbs 17:10

A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool.

Proverbs 27:5-6

Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

You know your friendship is healthy when you consistently confront the sin in each other's lives more than you talk about the sin in everyone else's. If your friend is gossiping, then your role as their friend is to help bring it to their attention with a gentle and loving rebuke.

And this is a two-way street. What I mean is that healthy friendship isn't what happens when one person is constantly picking the other person apart. It isn't one person who is more than willing to tell the other person that they're wrong but flies off the handle or gets defensive when the roles are reversed. That's not a friend, it's a bully.

So, to be a good friend means you are willing to be confronted without becoming defensive. It also means you are willing to love your friend enough that you won't stand by and let them get destroyed by their own sin.

It's the kind of friend Nathan was when he loved King David enough to confront him over his sin with Bathsheba.

It's the kind of friend Paul was when he confronted Peter over his hypocrisy when Peter wasn't living out the gospel and turned his back on Gentile believers.

Healthy friends hold you accountable to what is good and right. How do your friendships practice that kind of accountability? Are there any hard conversations you need to have in the near future in order to be a good friend?

CHARACTERISTIC #4 – HEALTHY FRIENDS COMMIT TO THE FRIENDSHIP

Proverbs 17:17

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

Sometimes life feels like a roller coaster ride. Lots of twists and turns. Lots of ups and downs. And most of it happens really fast. Healthy friends are the ones who are committed to be on the ride with you. That's a healthy friend. They are the ones you call when the bottom drops out. They are reliable and stable and committed.

500 years ago, the Christian world was rocked by a reformer named Martin Luther. Luther was a Roman Catholic priest during a time with moral corruption and theological error were rampant in the Church. As Luther began to study the Bible for himself, he realized that God grants us salvation on the basis of His grace alone through our faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. And once his eyes were opened to the truth of the gospel, he went to work making it known to the entire world.

And it made him the target of countless hardships. He was excommunicated from the Church. He was declared an outlaw by Emperor Charles V. He faced countless attacks and personal threats to his life. The Pope threatened have him burned at the stake.

And while the bullseye was placed squarely on Luther, he didn't weather the storm alone. He had a friend named Philip Melanchthon. Through thick and thin, Melanchthon stood by Luther. He helped

him clarify his thoughts. He challenged him and held him accountable. Most of all, he stuck close to his friend.

As Luther suffered bouts of deep depression and self-doubt, Philip refused to leave his side. Luther wrote, "I had rather die than be separated from Philip." When Luther died, his friend, Philip Melancthon spoke at the funeral. When Melancthon died, he was buried next to Luther. Inseparable in life and death. God brought the great reformation to the world, in no small way, through the commitment two friends had for God and each other.

Healthy friends are consistently committed. Are you that kind of friend? Some of you have a friend like that. When was the last time you told them what it means to you to know that you can count on them? Maybe that's your takeaway for this week.

CHARACTERISTIC #5 – HEALTHY FRIENDS HONOR APPROPRIATE BOUNDARIES

Proverbs 25:17

Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house, lest he have his fill of you and hate you.

Roughly translated, that means good friends know when to go home. They don't overstay their welcome or push the limits of hospitality. This is a great verse to send your out-of-town friends and family who never showed an interest in coming to see you until you moved to coastal Florida. Benjamin Franklin said, "Guests, like fish, begin to smell after three days."

But seriously, the underlying principle here is that healthy friendships honor appropriate boundaries. True friends don't make you feel pressured to say yes to everything.

As most of you know, I'm close friends with the pastor of another church on Merritt Island, Pastor Corky Calhoun from Georgianna Church. Corky came to Georgianna about the same time I came to First Baptist – over 20 years ago. It wasn't long after that we met, and Corky invited me to have lunch with him. We've been friends ever since. And that friendship has enabled us to partner in various forms of ministry together through the years. Georgianna partners with us through House of Hope. We've partnered with their orphanage in Haiti.

It's been a humbling and encouraging thing to see what the Lord has done in our community through a Southern Baptist church and a former United Methodist Church that love and respect each other as church families.

And one of the things Corky and I have talked about through the years is that the strength of our friendship isn't expressed in our willingness to say "yes" as much as it is in our freedom to say "no." We don't partner in everything together. As a matter of fact, we don't partner in most things together. We feel completely free to say "no" to each other.

Healthy friends respect each other's boundaries. They respect each other's time and energy and finances. Healthy friends aren't a hoard of locusts that consume everything they can get. They don't demand to be the only thing in your life because they actually care about you and want you to be well. And that brings us to the last characteristic of healthy friends.

CHARACTERISTIC #6 – HEALTHY FRIENDS MUTUALLY BENEFIT ONE ANOTHER

Proverbs 27:17

Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.

Healthy friends make each other better. They make each other sharper and improve one another's effectiveness. Good friendship isn't a one-way street.

Hebrews 10:24-25

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

As you evaluate your friendship, think through these dynamics.

- Do your friends intentionally encourage you to love the things you should love – God, your family, the church, people who are far from God?
- Do your friends intentionally encourage you to do what's right – do they stir you up to good works?
- Do your friends encourage you by building you up and not tearing you down?
- Do your friends remind you that Jesus is coming again and that we should be ready to meet Him?

I know many of us have friends who aren't followers of Jesus and I'm certainly not saying that you need to dump your unsaved friends. Not at all. What I'm saying is that we should be pursuing something for our friendship. And for those of us who know Jesus, our deepest desire should be that our friends would come to know Jesus.

Because, ultimately, there is no greater friend than Jesus. And Jesus is a friend to sinners like us.

John 15:13

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

In the ultimate act of selfless love, Jesus came to this world to live the life we have all failed to live – a sinless life of perfect obedience to God the Father. He came to die the death we all deserve to die – as the punishment for our sin. He lay down His life for his friends.

There is no greater friend than Jesus. He is the one who sticks closer than a brother – He will never leave us or forsake us. He sharpens us by placing His Spirit in us to produce His life in us. He opens Himself to us in way that we never have to worry about wearing out our welcome with Him – He calls us to boldly and persistently come to Him in prayer.

There is no greater or better friend than Jesus. Do you know Him? Is your relationship with Him the priority of your life? Are you seeking to help your friends know Jesus and grow in their relationship with Him?