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Proverbs #3

Sermon Summary #3

Sticky Friends

Proverbs 18:24

2 Timothy 4:9-21

This is our third week in the book of Proverbs, and if we've learned anything thus far it is that Proverbs is all about *the practical dynamics of living in a fallen world*. As I said in the opening message, this book doesn't tell us why we exist but aims to instruct us in *how to navigate the often treacherous waters of life and relationships*.

Let me remind you again of two crucial truths that govern our study of this book. First, we must never forget that *the proverbs are not promises, they are principles*. This means that there are always going to be *exceptions* to the many and varied scenarios that are described in this book. Second, I explained that the primary concern for all of us is *the gaining of wisdom*. Wisdom is skill for living. Wisdom is the spiritual savvy that leads to success in life; it is the capacity to discern good from evil. As my friend Ray Ortlund has said, "Wisdom is skill for living when there is no obvious rule to go by" (165).

Thus far we've looked closely at what Proverbs says about peer pressure and what it is about human nature that makes us so susceptible to the influence of others. Last week we talked about talking, that is to say, we examined Proverbs on words, speech, the power of the tongue, and both the good and evil it can accomplish.

Today we turn our attention to what Proverbs says about friends: who they are, what kind of friends we should pursue and which ones to avoid, how we should treat them, and why friendship is such a vitally important issue in life.

There is one thing to remember as we get started. You can thrive financially without friends. You can live a long and healthy physical existence on earth without friends. You can build a huge reputation among your peers without friends. You can gain power and prestige without friends. "But you cannot become wise without a Christian friend speaking into your life" (Ortlund, 168). "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm" (Prov. 13:20).

To get us started, I don't want to begin with Proverbs in the OT but with Paul in the NT. Look with me again, if only briefly, at 2 Timothy 4:9-21. Are you aware that ***these are the last words ever written by the apostle Paul?*** He knew that his execution was near. And what occupies his mind and heart as he lives out his final days? His friends! His need for their presence. His pain at their betrayal. His joy in their company.

There are a couple of things we can learn from this final paragraph of Paul's life that will help us when we turn to Proverbs. ***First, Paul dispels the myth that cultivating close, intimate relationships is primarily, if not exclusively, for weak and immature people who are emotionally needy.*** His words refute the notion that friendship exists only for those who need to have their sagging spirits bolstered; that it is only for weak people who struggle with feelings of insecurity.

Paul also destroys the notion that friendship is for those who are untaught; for those with little or no theological training; for those with poor theology; for those who just haven't had the time or opportunity to study the Bible (as if knowledge of the latter precludes the need for friends). Does this sound like Paul? Can you hear Paul saying to Timothy:

"Don't bother yourself Timothy. I'm perfectly o.k. all alone. I don't need you or anyone else for that matter. I'd actually prefer to be left alone. I've matured in my faith beyond the need for encouragement and support and the companionship of others."

No! Paul saw in Timothy and his other friends something that theology alone, books alone, sound thinking alone, could never do.

Finally, ***Paul virtually scoffs at the suggestion that "I don't need friends. All I need is Jesus."*** One of the problems with this is that even Jesus himself sought out and cultivated close, intimate relationships while on the earth. Look at Paul. Not even the presence of the Lord himself precluded the need for the intimate companionship of another believer. Paul's gratitude for Christ's comforting presence in vv. 17-18 is not a substitute for friendship with other people. His point is simply that the Lord was there to do for me what others failed to do because of their absence.

There is almost a sense of desperation in his voice. Notwithstanding all that Paul was (an apostle), knew, had seen, heard, and experienced, he wanted Timothy. Feel the passion and urgency in his words: **"Timothy, make every effort to come to me soon!"**

"Timothy, I am an apostle. I've seen the risen Christ. I've been the recipient of revelations that no other man has known. I've healed the sick and even raised the dead. I'm the author of a dozen or more inspired books of the NT. But please, please, *I need you*: your presence, your friendship, your words to comfort me, someone to whom I can pour out my heart, bare my soul, talk about my fears, doubts, and sins; someone I can trust with knowledge of my weaknesses and frailties and frustrations. Timothy, make every effort to come soon!"

Five Observations and Suggestions on Friendship in Proverbs

(1) Why is friendship so important? Or is it?

It is important because it is so rare and so difficult to find! “Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love, ***but a faithful man who can find?***” (Proverbs 20:6). It’s one thing for someone to loudly proclaim their loyalty to you; but be careful; don’t give your heart to someone until there is an established pattern and history of devotion and sincerity and sacrifice.

Friendship is crucially important because in it we gain the wise counsel of people who care about us and can perhaps see things from a different angle.

“Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 11:14).

“Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed” (Proverbs 15:22).

“Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel” (Proverbs 27:9).

This last text tells us that just as simple luxuries like perfume and oil bring a sweet and enjoyable blessing to life, so too does a friend who gives us counsel out of his experience and wisdom and maturity in life.

In friendship we experience both moral and mental refinement. Friends sharpen our souls.

“Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17).

“Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy” (Proverbs 27:6).

In spite of what you think you need, I assure you that you don’t want to be surrounded by a bunch of yes-men who shout glad-hearted approval of everything you say and cater to your every whim. What each of us needs is not all-accepting and unqualified approval of everything we do and say but a loving honesty that is often blunt. By ourselves we become dull and fuzzy and we lose our edge. We need friends who will resist the temptation to flatter us and will speak truth in order to refine us.

When iron sharpens iron there is friction. It’s not like one warm fuzzy puppy caressing another warm and fuzzy puppy. In true friendship, sparks fly! The sound makes your skin crawl. But the result is moral sharpness and spiritual depth and increased trust. True friendship will often hurt, but never harm.

“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Proverbs 17:17).

In friendship we are blessed with the constancy of genuine love. A brother, which is to say a family member to whom you are related by blood, will be there when adversity comes; his connection is deep and he will not be frightened off by hard times. But better still is a friend who loves “at all times,” whether in adversity or prosperity.

(2) Keep your friends few. Be selective.

This may sound as if I’m reversing myself from what I said a moment ago about the importance of friendships in life. Yes, friendship is of crucial importance. But ***that doesn’t mean you can or should become close friends with everyone.*** You may have numerous companions and acquaintances in life, but keep your close friends few. This is what we see in Proverbs 18:24 –

“A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24).

If you try to multiply friends indiscriminately, you will sooner or later get the wrong kind. ***The warning isn’t against having friends, but against multiplying friends out of a misguided desire to be liked by everyone.***

One true friend is superior to a multitude of casual acquaintances. It may be great that you know everyone and everyone knows you. That feels good. But don’t assume this means they are the sort who will sacrifice everything for you when you are in a crisis. The word translated “sticks closer” means to cling to, to adhere tightly to, never to abandon or betray. That is the sort of friend you most need, and they are almost always in short supply. So cherish them when you find them.

There is also an important lesson in Proverbs 25:19 –

“Trusting in a treacherous man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth or a foot that slips” (Proverbs 25:19).

Nothing hurts quite like the disloyalty and betrayal of someone you trusted. It’s like a decaying, rotten tooth and a palsied, disjointed foot. Not only are they functionally useless (for chewing and walking), they hurt!

The apostle Paul learned this lesson all too well. Look again at 2 Timothy 4:14. We don’t know what “great harm” Alexander caused. Certainly he attacked Paul’s teaching (v. 15). Others believe he was responsible for Paul’s arrest and may even have served as a witness against him. Listen to Paul’s advice: “Timothy, stay away from him. Guard yourself from him and others like him.” ***Not everyone is a candidate to be a friend.***

Perhaps the greatest pain Paul endured from an unfaithful friend concerned a man named Demas. (see 2 Tim. 4:10a, 16). The defection of Demas was especially painful to Paul, for at one time Demas had been one of his closest and seemingly most trustworthy fellow-workers in the ministry. See Col. 4:14; Philemon 24. But these two texts and

their description of Demas refer to Paul's first Roman imprisonment when conditions were not so threatening and Demas was only too happy to stand by the apostle. It was easy. By the time Paul wrote 2 Timothy his life was at stake and Demas wanted nothing to do with him. The verb implies not simply that Demas had "left" but had "left him in the lurch," had abandoned and forsaken him.

Your own experience with this sort of person has probably made you hesitant, perhaps you have even closed your heart to starting new friendships. But Paul didn't let the betrayal and abandonment of Demas and others scare him off or sour him to friendship altogether. He didn't say, "Oh, Timothy, how do I know you won't abandon me like Demas did?" Such painful experiences with other people ought not to justify isolation but rather motivate and energize discernment. Don't give up on friendship: just be careful!

(3) Be careful and cautious about friendships built on wealth.

"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. 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" (Proverbs 19:4-7).

This isn't an indictment against wealthy people or those who are greatly generous. It is a simple observation on what so often happens: people are quick to pledge their loyalty to those from whom they can make a profit, but their friendship is at best surface level and will not long survive. Those of you who are blessed with great wealth, be cautious! Some will play themselves up to you as the best friend you've got, but their motives are mercenary. They will cater to your likes and avoid your dislikes not because they care about you but for what they hope to gain. The words translated "seek the favor" of a generous man literally means "to caress or stroke the face."

As for v. 7, people often stand aloof and detached when hard financial times come upon a person to whom they previously had related as friends. Sadly, some people are fine being friends with someone until their financial needs become more than they can handle.

(4) There are some people with whom you should never be friends. Avoid them like the plague!

The first group to avoid are *the evil, the wicked*.

"Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil. Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on" (Proverbs 4:14-15).

"Be not envious of evil men, nor desire to be with them, for their hearts devise violence, and their lips talk of trouble" (Proverbs 24:1-2).

Stay away from *the fool!*

“Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge” (Proverbs 14:7).

He has in mind the person who hates knowledge, is unteachable, arrogant, is not open to rebuke, has a flippant attitude toward sin, is impetuous and deceitful.

The hot-tempered are a poor choice for close friends.

“Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare” (Proverbs 22:24-25).

You must also steer clear of *the person given to excess*.

“Hear, my son, and be wise, and direct your heart in the way. Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat, for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags” (Proverbs 23:19-21).

Don’t restrict this to eating and drinking. It could refer to anyone who lacks self-control: the person addicted to video games, the woman who is a shop-a-holic, the man who spends excessive time with his hobby to the neglect of his family, etc.

Finally, avoid too close of a relationship with *the perpetually discontented*.

“My son, fear the LORD and the king, and do not join with those who do otherwise, for disaster will arise suddenly from them, and who knows the ruin that will come from them both?” (Proverbs 24:21-22).

He’s talking about the person who loves change for change’s sake. He also has in mind here those always inclined to throw off authority, whether it be that of the governing leaders or of God.

(5) Proverbs on how to treat your friends

Be generous.

“Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, ‘Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it’—when you have it with you” (Proverbs 3:27-28).

“Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor” (Proverbs 14:21).

If a friend is in desperate need and you are in a position to help, don't defer the gift; it increases the worries of the one in need and intensifies his embarrassment and shame in having to ask for help. Provide the gift without making him feel as if he's now in your debt.

Do them no harm.

“Do not plan evil against your neighbor, who dwells trustingly beside you” (Proverbs 3:29).

The point is that your neighbor is unsuspecting; he has complete trust in you; he feels secure in your relationship and thus takes no steps to protect himself. So don't take advantage of his confidence in you to do him harm!

Always speak the truth (don't lie to them or about them).

“A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a war club, or a sword, or a sharp arrow” (Proverbs 25:18).

Whenever possible, cover his failures.

“Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends” (Proverbs 17:9).

“Do not say, ‘I will do to him as he has done to me; I will pay the man back for what he has done’” (Proverbs 24:29).

This doesn't mean he glosses over or altogether ignores the shortcomings of a friend. Often there are instances when the failures of one must be brought to the attention of others, especially if he or she poses a threat to the safety of someone else or if their dishonest business dealings pose a threat to the financial welfare of another. What he means is that ***whenever possible a real friend takes steps to protect another's reputation and does not indiscriminately spread rumors, even if the rumors are true. He labors to bring about reconciliation and does not allow a wound to justify making known the sins of his friend.*** To “cover” is virtually a synonym for “forgive.”

Settle your disputes in private.

“Do not hastily bring into court, for what will you do in the end, when your neighbor puts you to shame? Argue your case with your neighbor himself, and do not reveal another's secret, lest he who hears you brings shame upon you, and your ill repute have no end” (Proverbs 25:8-10).

If you seek legal action hastily and lose, you are the one who will be put “to shame” (v. 8). If you have a complaint, talk about it confidentially in private and reconcile among yourselves. Don’t be a gossip!

Don’t overstay your welcome.

“Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house, lest he have his fill of you and hate you” (Proverbs 25:17).

You need time together with friends but you also need time away from them.

Avoid excessive use of practical jokes.

“Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death is the man who deceives his neighbor and says, ‘I am only joking!’” (Proverbs 26:18-19).

This isn’t a denunciation of the proper use of humor and sarcasm. But be careful that you don’t overdo it! Practical jokes and stinging comments have their place, but too much of a good thing can eventually become destructive.

Respond appropriately and with compassion to their pain.

“Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on soda” (Proverbs 25:20).

This proverb warns us against speaking frivolous words to those with deep hurts. He’s talking about the person who is both insensitive and inept when it comes to trying to help a person in pain. The second line refers to pouring stinging vinegar on an open wound. The wise and sensitive person knows when to weep and when to rejoice.

This one always reminds me of the Peanuts cartoon scene where Charlie Brown is obviously distraught and even depressed. He comes to Lucy for counsel and encouragement.

“I hate being a nothing,” says Charlie. “I refuse to go through the rest of my life as a zero!”

“What would you like to be, Charlie Brown, a five? Or how about a twenty-six? Or a par seventy-two? I know what you could be, Charlie Brown . . . a square root! I think you’d make a great square root, Charlie Brown.”

“I can’t stand it!”

Conclusion

One final comment is in order. Nothing creates and sustains genuine, life-long, loving friendship quite like the gospel. Yes, by all means cultivate friendship with non-Christians. This may be the most effective avenue for leading them to Christ. But nothing serves to solidify friends and knit their hearts in common cause like the gospel does. It is your shared faith in Christ and your common cause for his glory that will see you through the best and the worst of times.