

Friend: Proverbs 27:1-17

We've reached our penultimate look at Proverbs. Next week will be our last. We've seen what Proverbs has to say to a number of different areas of our lives. The truth is we've only scratched the surface of what the book has to say – which is fine because it means we can come back another time. But this week we're going to see what it has to say on the subject of friends.

So, how many friends have you got? I'm not talking about the 433 friends you have on Facebook, I'm talking about real friends. Well, forget about numbers, what's the quality of your friendships like? Now, I hope by now that you understand the premise of this book of Proverbs is that there is a difference between just living and bumbling your way through life, and living life with wisdom, with skill: the kind of skilful, wise living that's built on the fear of God. And given that it's not surprising that Proverbs has plenty to say about your friends. Because if you want to negotiate and navigate your way through life with skill, if you want to live your life to the max the way God would have you, you need to pick the right fellow travelers. Pick the wrong ones and suddenly your journey gets all the harder.

So we're going to see what Proverbs has to say about choosing your friends wisely, and who to avoid. We're going to see what it has to say about maintaining and defending your friendships against attack and we'll finish by considering the friend everyone of us needs.

Choosing your friends

How do you choose your friends? How do you decide this is someone I want to spend time with? Now, I know someone whose mother came back from church one day and told her daughter that she had just met her daughter's future husband, before her daughter had ever seen him let alone spoken to him. But her mother just knew. And she was right. But I don't think many of us work like that. We don't tend to observe someone from a distance and think 'hmm, they meet my criteria, I'll have him as my friend' and then try and develop the friendship. More often we drift into friendships and they develop over time. And Proverbs provides us with some great guidance: as you see this friendship grow and develop, is this one you should invest your time and energy in, or would you be wiser to let it fall by the wayside?

Let's start by looking at who Proverbs says we should avoid. And young people I want you to listen in especially, particularly with school starting back, and think about your friendships and who's influencing who.

1. Who to avoid:

a. Sinners: In chapter 1, Solomon tells his sons the first group to avoid getting involved with: sinners: 1:10 'My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent.' Now, given that we're all sinners, we all have this natural bent towards doing what's wrong, outside of Jesus we all stand separated from God, ruling out having a sinner as a friend kind of narrows the field somewhat doesn't it? You can have any friend you like provided it's a budgie. But read the rest of that chapter and Solomon is talking about the kind of person who entices you, draws you away into stuff you know is wrong. At least, when it starts you know it's wrong, but the

more time you spend with this person the more the edges seem to blur and those films they encourage you to watch with them don't seem so bad after all, or what's the harm of drink or drugs if no-one else gets hurt. What once seemed crystal clear is now much more murky. And Solomon says, watch out for that kind of friend. In 23:19-21 he says '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'. Watch the kind of person you associate with, he says. The way they behave will inevitably impact their life and yours, and the party monster, his or her friendship seems great at the start, but the blessing of that friendship soon wears thin.

b. Put-Down Kid: Next one Solomon says to avoid I'm going to call the put-down kid. Proverbs 20:19 'whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a simple babblers'. There is a kind of friend Proverbs says, who spends their time putting others down. They slander them, they mock them. They think they're great but everyone else gets the put-down treatment. No-one's reputation is safe in their hands. But Proverbs 21:20 makes the correct diagnosis as to where the problem really lies: 'The soul of the wicked desires evil; his neighbour finds no mercy in his eyes'. In other words, a negative, critical attitude – finding no mercy for someone else in your heart says more about your heart than about the other person.

Now, have you ever met someone like that? That kind of constant put-down attitude is so corrosive. And what you find is that to stay in this person's good books, to keep their friendship, you have to slowly, subtly, but surely join them in putting others down. You're better off without that kind of friendship Solomon says.

c. The Jealous Friend: Third characteristic Solomon would encourage us to avoid is the jealous friend: Proverbs 27:4 'Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy?' Jealousy in a friendship ultimately destroys relationships. A jealous friend wants you for him or herself alone. They want to control you and have dominance over you in a way that is wrong and consuming. If you find you are being made to cut off other relationships, sever friendships in order to keep this person happy, you need to seriously consider the wisdom of that friendship. You and I have been created by God for relationships, but there are types of relationships that are unhealthy and jealousy is one of them. And young ladies, you need to watch that especially in any future boy-girl relationship. There is a type of jealousy for you that's right: it comes from the heart of a God who passionately, jealously loves you, that fights for your protection, that wants to honour you. But there's another that's wrong. And Proverbs says avoid it.

d. Anger: Fourth characteristic Solomon gives to avoid in a friend is the friend given to anger: Proverbs 22:24-25 – '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'. There is a kind of friend who is given to strops. Have you ever known someone like that? And they storm off on you, and the door slams on the way out,

and they drive off in a huff. And you're not always entirely sure what causes it, but they get seriously angry about something, and you spend your life chasing after them, trying to calm them down, stroking their ego, and giving in to their anger. Solomon's advice is blunt: don't make a friendship with such a person. If they make a habit of blowing their stack and storming off, don't rush in pursuit of them.

And Solomon gives good reason to avoid them, and this works for the sinners and the put-down kid and the jealous friend as well. To a greater or lesser degree we become like those we spend time with. In Solomon's words, you learn their ways. It rubs off on you. So just consider whether you are entangled with anyone who meets those kind of descriptions. Young people especially, consider wisely your friends – are these the kind of people I want to be influenced by? Who's influencing who in this relationship? Now that's not a green light to form a holy-huddle and withdraw from the world. Jesus calls us to be salt and light. But it is a call to examine which way the influence is flowing in our relationships.

So as well as considering your friends, ask yourself how you compare to those descriptions: your conduct, your speech do they drag others down or build them up? In the work place, and amongst your friends, are others' reputations safe in your hands? Are jealousy and anger under control in your friendships?

Well, as well as pointing out the kind of friends to avoid, Proverbs gives some excellent advice on what to look for.

2. Who to choose:

a. Character

Well, right up there at the top of the list is character. Listen to Proverbs 22:11 'He who loves purity of heart, and whose speech is gracious, will have the king as his friend'. And what's good for kings is good for us, and Solomon says this combination of integrity and charm in a friend is priceless. It's not just purity of heart- because frankly you can have someone who is so whiter than white they're dull: and it's not just someone who says all the right things but it all seems a bit vacuous: you put your penny in and out comes a bible verse. It is those two - integrity and charm - combined: the person who inspires you and challenges you with their life, but who's also great company. And don't just look for that in others, Solomon says, be that kind of friend.

b. Stickability

The second characteristic to look for is stickability – the friend who sticks by you when things are tough and when maybe you're not such a great person to be around. Your circumstances change and there's not so much to be gained from this relationship by your friend. You're going through a tough spell and you're grumpy and irritable, and not much fun to be around. Well, Solomon warns against fair-weather friends, who are happy to be your friend all the time they can get something from you: Proverbs 19:4 Wealth brings many new friends, but a poor man is deserted by his friend. Proverbs 19:6 Many seek the favour of a generous man, and everyone is a friend to a man who gives gifts; or Proverbs 19:7 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'. Those are fair-weather friends. They're your friends when things are good. They're your friends when you have stuff they can enjoy. But when your circumstances change, and it's only you they can enjoy, they disappear.

Well, it's at times like that, Solomon says, when true friends show their colours: because they don't give up on you. Listen to the question Solomon asks in Proverbs 20:6: 'Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love, but a faithful man who can find?' In other words, there are plenty of so-called friends who talk the talk, but when the crunch comes and you need them, do they walk the walk? True friendship is tested in the heat of adversity, and it's in your moment of adversity when Solomon says in 19:22 that 'what is desired in a man is steadfast love.' The kind of love that doesn't let go of you even though it would be easy to do so. The kind of love that steadfastly stands by you.

And Proverbs suggests that that kind of friendship, whilst it may be uncommon is possible. Proverbs 18:24 'A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother'. You can have multiple acquaintances, and when you need them, they disappear, but a real friend sticks to you. And Proverbs 17:17 'a friend loves at all times and a brother is born for adversity'.

So where can you find those kind of friends? Especially when you're uprooted and your old friends may be hundreds, thousands of miles away. Where can you find those kinds of friends? Well, the apostles Peter and John faced just that predicament. They were arrested, threatened and bullied by the authorities for telling others about Jesus. This was their moment of adversity, when they needed others to stand with them. Who did these two men turn to? Where was the first place they went when they were released from trial? Acts 4:23 tells us 'When they were released, they went to their friends,' to the church who were praying for them.

So where can you find those kind of friends? The answer is -here, in this room, and its by investing your life in others in the church, and in particular by joining a small group, that you can begin to find those kinds of sticky friends.

But what about you? Isn't that the kind of friend you want to be to others? In Leviticus 19:18 God says 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself'. And that word neighbour is the same word translated in Proverbs as Friend. Love your friend as yourself. Be the kind of faithful, steadfast, sticky friend to others that you want for yourself.

c. Honest counsel

There's one more characteristic of a real friend that proverbs consistently describes and that is their willingness to give you honest counsel. Now you might have a friend and they always make you feel good about yourself and they always tell you what you want to hear and they always agree with whatever you say. And you might think, 'they're a great friend.' And Proverbs says, no they're not. What they're doing is flattering you and flattery does you no favours:

Proverbs 26:28 says 'A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin.' Proverbs 29:5 says 'a man who flatters his neighbour (his friend) spreads a net for his feet'.

A real friend –someone who loves you and cares for you and is prepared to stand by you through thick and thin - is also prepared at times to tell you things about yourself that you don't want to hear. Listen to Proverbs 27:9 'Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel' but sometimes that counsel is less sweet and more bitter. Proverbs describes it as the friend who is prepared to wound: 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.' And it is that willingness to hang in with you for the long haul, not just to tickle your ego, but to walk the hard path of life together that builds true lasting friendship. Proverbs 28:23 says 'Whoever rebukes a man will afterward find more favour than he who flatters with his tongue.'

At the time it may not seem sweet, but it's afterward, when the flatterers have long gone, that the counsel of a true friend finds favour. That's why Proverbs 27:17 says 'Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.' You don't sharpen a blade on a sponge, and you and I don't grow and mature as men and women of God through flattery. You sharpen iron with iron and it is your friends, your true real friends who are at times prepared to say the hard things, and give earnest counsel that sharpens you. Doesn't mean it's easy to take; the wounds of a friend are still wounds but they are more faithful and do you far more good than the kisses of an enemy.

Now, if you have such a friend, or you gain such a friend, you want to keep them.

Keeping your friends

Proverbs is honest with us: you cannot assume your friendships will endure. Commenting on 'the friend' in Proverbs Derek Kidner says 'The closest of friendships need guarding'. And he's right. Whilst these real friendships can be some of the rock-solid features of our lives, those same granite-like friendships are vulnerable to assault. Remember, even Jesus saw key friendships crumble: Judas, betrayed him, and Peter denied he had ever known him. So you and I shouldn't be surprised that the strongest of friendships is vulnerable to attack from without and from within.

It's vulnerable to attack from without. Proverbs 16:28 says 'A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends'. Whether it is intentional or not spreading gossip and listening to gossip can destroy friendships. So make a decision to be a stopping place for rumours and gossip, and choose to think the best of others, especially of your friends.

But your friendships are also vulnerable to attack from within. Proverbs 17:9 says 'whoever covers an offence seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends'. None of us are perfect, and even the closest of friends say or do things that cause unjustified hurt to their friends. But what do you do when that happens – when you're on the receiving end of that? Do you keep

reminding your friend of that, keep bringing it up, keep picking away at the scab? If you do, it will wreck the friendship. Or do you cover that offence with grace, and be prepared to be the one who has been wronged, and choose to forgive and not to take offense. If you do, not only will you save your friendship, as you show your friend grace, you'll strengthen that friendship.

So Proverbs tells us the kind of friends to be cautious of, and those we should cultivate and defend. But if we are honest with ourselves we have a desire for friendship that no single or even multiple human friends could satisfy. St. Augustine expressed it well when he said 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.'

The friend you need

In Proverbs 18:24 Solomon says that there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. And I have no doubt Solomon was talking about a close, human, flesh and blood friend. But over the years Christians have read that verse and seen in Solomon's words a glimpse of Jesus Christ: a friend, a true, real, steadfast, faithful friend who sticks closer than a brother.

And the incredible good news of Jesus, the gospel, is that He offers people like us His friendship. In Luke 7:34 Luke records that Jesus was happy to be called 'a friend of tax-collectors and sinners'. The very people who the religious types looked down on Jesus welcomed as His friends. You don't have to brush yourself up, or get yourself sorted to be a friend of Jesus Christ.

But you do have to come with faith. In James 2:23 James, Jesus' brother, describes how Abraham was made right in God's sight: "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness' – and he was called God's friend.' It is friendship with God, by faith. You and I cannot bring anything with us to earn God's friendship. Nothing you say, do or think can impress Him. Worse than that we bring with us a whole load of stuff that rightly deserves not God's friendship but his enmity. But at the cross Jesus took all that upon himself and became sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. And it is as we put our trust in Jesus and what He has done for us, that we can know His forgiveness, His righteousness and His friendship. A friend whose love is steadfast, who sticks with us through the storm, who will never flatter or deceive us, who is committed to seeing us become like Him, and who defends us against all-comers. The Friend who sticks closer than a brother.