

**“Friendship”**  
**Proverbs 27:1-10**  
**August 16, 2009**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

We want to look today at the topic of friendship. I chose this topic after Corb asked me to consider preaching a sermon to help us prepare as a church for the new adult Sunday School communities that will be starting in September. Since we want these communities to help promote the formation of good friendships, this seemed a good topic to talk about. As I have thought about friendship in preparation for this sermon, several more reasons for addressing it have occurred to me. For example, school is starting back up again after the summer recess. Some are going to college for the first time. Others are starting in a new school. The number one anxiety for the vast majority of these students has little to do with grades. Rather, their anxieties often center around the topic of friendships. Will I be able to make good friends? Will any of my friends be in my lunch period, or will I have to sit alone?

One of the surprises in the book of Proverbs is the frequency of this topic of friendship. While it would be wrong to put friendship at the top of the list of values in the book of Proverbs, it does seem to occupy a higher value than we give to it in our culture. Certainly such values as the fear of the Lord and trusting the Lord are more important than friendship, but the sheer number of times this topic comes up ought to give us pause. The view of Proverbs is that friendship is an important part of living wisely. Friendlessness can lead to ruin. Consider Proverbs 18:24 – **“A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”** I was talking with a pastor this week who told me about a small group he had just started in his church. It was a group of men who were struggling with various sexual addictions. He said that he had noticed that all the men had in common the lack of this “friend who sticks closer than a brother.” None of them had close male friendships, and the wisdom of Proverbs says that such a person may come to ruin as a result of that deficit.

Our culture’s view of friendship is in marked contrast to the high importance given it in Proverbs. In a sermon he preached on this topic, Tim Keller mentioned an interesting point about the difference between *The Lord of the Rings* book compared to the movie. In Tolkien’s book, one of the major themes was this theme of friendship. Sam’s loyalty to Frodo and Frodo’s loyalty to all his friends, were significant parts of the book and its plot development. But the movie gave only minimal emphasis to that topic, and replaced it instead with the romantic interest between Arwyn and Aragorn, something that

had only minimal emphasis in the book. Our culture elevates romantic love, while giving little value to friendship love.

Friendship is the theme of the first 22 verses of Proverbs 27. As we have said before, the compiler of these Proverbs grouped them thematically and gives verbal clues throughout each section to tell us about this grouping. The Hebrew scholar Bruce Waltke groups verses 1-22 around this theme of friendship. As you read this section, you will see that not every verse is directly about friendship. But Waltke says that every verse is to be applied to the topic of friendship. He calls this section “A Manual on Friendship,” giving us insight into the nature of true friendship. I think you will see what he means by this as we go through the first ten verses of the passage, noting three things it teaches us about the forming of good friendships.

## **I. Don't Be Desperate**

Those who are desperate to have a friend are susceptible to one of the errors the book of Proverbs warns of repeatedly—the forming of unhealthy friendships. If you are desperate for a friend, you may end up taking the first candidate who comes along, and this person may turn out to be a foolish friend who will do you more harm than good. The danger of the bad friend can be seen in the first ten verses of our passage, which consists of five sections of two verses each. These smaller two-verse sections alternate between a positive and a negative statement about friendship. So it begins with a positive statement in the first two verses (which we will look at in our next point), followed by a negative statement in verses 3-4. Note in verses 3-4 the escalating list of problems brought by the bad friend. It begins with the **“fool's provocation,”** which is heavier than carrying around a large stone or a bag of sand. This is speaking of irritations and annoyances of a foolish person. For example, have you ever been around someone who pretends to know everything. No matter what you tell that person, he acts as if he already knew it. Such a burdensome person becomes heavy after a while. Then it escalates in verse 4 to an angry person, who overwhelms us with his rage, sweeping away all that is before him like a flood sweeps away everything in its path. But then, surprisingly, the final step in the escalating qualities of the bad friend is jealousy, before whom no friendship can stand.

There are many other warnings throughout the book of Proverbs concerning the foolish companion. Consider, for example, Proverbs 13:20. **“Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.”** The first half of the verse is straightforward. To walk with someone is a Hebrew way of speaking of friendship. One of the benefits of friendship is that the virtues of your friend will rub off on you. If your friend is wise, you will catch some of that wisdom. If your friend has integrity and good character, some of that will rub off on you. The flip side of this is also true. To

choose friends who are foolish will produce a bad result in your life. But did you notice in the second half of this verse that the outcome of choosing a bad friend is unexpectedly bad? You would expect to read, “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will become foolish.” But it goes further and says that harm will come to the one who chooses foolish friends.

To be desperate for friends makes us less likely to make good friends. What is the opposite of being desperate? It is to trust God. In his book, *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis devotes an entire chapter to the topic of friendship love. He points out how friends are discovered rather than created. After talking about this truth, he says, “That is why those pathetic people who simply ‘want friends’ can never make any. The very condition of having Friends is that we should want something else besides Friends” (p. 98). In other words, in order to make friends, you will need to want something more than having friends. Let me give an analogy. One of my hobbies is woodworking, and one of the common machines used in woodworking is the table saw. It can be a dangerous tool, because the blade spins back in the direction of the operator. If the wood being cut becomes twisted in the blade, there is a chance that it will be thrown at a high speed into the operator. In order to prevent this, the operator must look, not at the blade, but at the fence along which the edge of the wood travels. As long as the wood is flat against the fence, it will not twist in the blade. Friendship is also like that. Good friends come in the process of focusing on something other than good friends, on loving and trusting God. The promise of Jesus in Matthew 6 applies here. **“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you”** (v. 33). Instead of being desperate for a friend, be desperate to love God and seek his kingdom, and you will find that often two or three good friends emerge from that. You are more likely to make a true friend while serving side by side with another helping an elderly widow in your community than by spending hours on Facebook.

## II. Be Humble

The first two verses of the chapter urge us away from boasting and toward a life of humility. We are not to boast about the supposed wisdom of our plans for the future, nor about anything else in our lives. Instead, we are to be humble people who wait on others to do any boasting about us. There are many ways that humility nourishes friendships. At its heart, friendship requires removing the focus from oneself and putting it on others, and only the humble can do that. We can infer from the statement in verse 2 that the only acceptable praise of ourselves is that which comes from the lips of others, that we are to practice a praise of others. Doing so requires that we stop thinking about ourselves long enough to notice what is praiseworthy in another. Humility takes the focus off ourselves and puts it on another. Twittering about every last detail of your life—what you just ate for lunch, the song you just

downloaded, what you are wearing on a particular day—all these self-focused communications take us further from true friendship. The same could be said about bragging on your children and talking at length about your latest physical ailments and doctor's visits.

Verse 10 also speaks about humility and its place in our friendships. The command is not to **“go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity.”** We know from the next part of this verse that the brother who is being spoken of here lives at a distance. Instead, go to your friend who lives near you. **“Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away.”** What this is telling us is that friendship requires giving another the gift of your need. The kind of vulnerability that is honest about our needs and willing to share those in appropriate ways with those near us is a necessity for good friendship. If you are the kind of person who likes to pretend that everything is fine, that you have no significant needs, then you have taken a step away from friendship toward isolation.

The well-known verse 17 also has an implication concerning the place of humility in our friendships. **“Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.”** While this verse is speaking primarily of the beneficial effects of honest rebukes, there is a principle of mutuality that applies to humility. The image is of two pieces of iron, one of which is a sword and the other a sharpening iron. The sharpening iron, though it seems to be of much less value than the sword, has something the sword needs. If the sword doesn't get the benefit of the sharpening iron, it becomes worth far less. Friendship requires the humble realization that I don't have it all. God has not given to any single individual the whole package, but has rather created us for interdependence.

### III. Be Loyal

Loyalty is commanded in verse 10. **“Do not forsake your friend and your father's friend.”** There is both a sweet and a sour side to loyalty. It's not syrupy sweet, but sweet and sour. Let's consider the sweet side first. **“The sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel”** (v. 9). The word translated “earnest” has the idea of passionate. In other words, the counsel is not the cold, distant advice of a professional counselor with whom you may have no relationship outside the counseling office, but rather that of the friend who is passionately committed to your flourishing.

Let's consider now the sour side of friendship, spoken of in verses 5 and 6, which speak of the necessity of rebuke in a true friendship. **“Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.”** Would you rather have a friend who claims to have a kind sentiment toward you but never does anything tangible (“hidden love”), or would you rather have a friend who loves you enough to speak the hard truth

into your life? Did you note the oxymoron of verse 6—the friendly wounds and the enemy’s kisses? A truly good friend is willing to wound. The paradox is that the only way to have a good friendship is to be willing to put at risk the friendship through the giving of timely rebukes.

**Illustration:** From the mid 1930’s to the late 40’s, C. S. Lewis met with a group of literary friends every Tuesday and Thursday to share conversation about their common interest in literature. They would also critique one another’s writings. What you need to understand about this group, referred to by the group itself as “The Inklings,” is that they were all writers themselves. For a writer to submit for critique the thing he pours his whole life into is not an easy thing. The group included Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and Lewis’ brother, Warnie. Warnie wrote in his diary, “We were no mutual admiration society... To read to the Inklings was a formidable ordeal.” (*Christian History*, 88:2). Yet arising out of these friendships were such formidable classics as *The Screwtape Letters*, the Narnia books, and *The Hobbit*.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Everyone wants friends, but only a few really have them. Why is that? Many point to trends within society as the explanation. We live in a mobile society, which takes away friends faster than new ones can be made. We live in a busy society which makes it challenging to commit the necessary time to forge good friendships. We live in a technological society which multiplies options for virtual relationships through such things as Facebook, Twitter and e-mail, but which also makes real face-to-face relationships more challenging.

As significant as these challenges may be, I don’t believe they are the biggest challenge. The greatest reason for our difficulty in forming good friendships is our lack of the qualities we’ve just identified. We lack a trust in God and become desperate for friends. We also lack humility and loyalty. But there is good news for all who will agree with this diagnosis. These things are called sin, and there is an answer for this problem in the Bible. God has come to earth in the person of Jesus and has befriended us. In John 15:15, Jesus says to his disciples, **“No longer do I call you servants...; but I have called you friends.”** Jesus was loyal to his friends. In the hour of his need, his three closest friends, Peter, James and John, all abandoned him. Peter even publicly denied Jesus. Yet Jesus remained faithful to his friends. He gave up everything for their sake. Most significantly, he even gave up his relationship with the Father. Jesus says to you, “I want you as my friend, and I am willing to go to hell to have you as my friend.” Once we understand that and receive that love from Jesus, we have unique power to be a friend. We have a new humility and a new loyalty. We learn to trust God instead of being desperate. It is as we believe the gospel and receive this love that these good gifts come to us.