

29-5-22

Wisdom in Friendship

Proverbs

Introduction

Friendship is a powerful force that evokes the strongest of emotions. This was powerfully illustrated back in 2015 when two pro-surfing friends embraced after a near miss with a shark. If you missed it, the pro surfer, Mick Fanning, was almost eaten by a shark in an event final off the coast of South Africa. And in a desperate attempt to help him, his friend and fellow title competitor, Juian Wilson, swam toward him despite the danger. In an interview following the incident Wilson broke down in tears at the thought of losing his mate. When asked by the reporter whether the world title still "meant anything" to him, Wilson replied: "No, not at all. I'm just happy that he's alive."

I don't know about you, but I find that sort of friendship really compelling. That's why I'm a big fan of the movie "Stand by me" and, more recently the Netflix series, "Stranger things" – they are stories that depict the power of friendship.

Genuine friendship is a powerful force. In the book of Proverbs the power of a *good* friendship even surpasses the family bond at times. Proverbs 27:10

*¹⁰ Don't abandon your friend or your father's friend,
and don't go to your brother's house
in your time of calamity;
better a neighbor nearby than a brother far away.*

Having even one good and genuine friend can make all the difference to our experience of life. At the same time, the lack of a genuine friend, or the betrayal of friendship can cast us into the depths of depression. Friendship is powerful and we need to get it right. We need God's wisdom. And in the book of Proverbs, we find such wisdom. So what we'll do this morning is think about three questions concerning wisdom in friendship: **what, who and how.** **What** makes a good friend? **Who** the wise should choose as close friends? **How** the gospel of Jesus gives us help and hope in the challenges of friendship.

1. **What makes a good friend.**

So let's think about the '**what**' of wisdom in friendship. You see, if you are I are going to become good friends to others, we need to know what the fundamentals of a good friend are. Well, the book of proverbs has much to say about what makes a good friend, but I think there are four general character traits that most verses on friendship fall into. Proverbs declares that a good friend is **loyal, honest, careful and trustworthy.**

Loyal

So let's think about the first one. A good friend is loyal. **Proverbs 17:17,**

*¹⁷ A friend loves at all times,
and a brother is born for a difficult time.*

A number of years ago I was assaulted by around 6-7 drunk guys at Kingsbury MacDonald's just up the road. I had attempted to intervene in a situation and paid the price. Now, it's not so much the beating that I remember from that night, but the loyalty of my friend who was there with me. You see, when everyone else in Maccas was watching with mouths open wide, my friend came to my defence and was himself beaten up. He didn't run, he didn't watch, he stuck by me in my moment of need. I remember him walking around dazed with a black eye afterward and thinking there is a loyal friend. Now that I'm a little older, I would caution getting involved in a situation like that, but I must say, I've always reflected on that moment with fondness, because that's where I saw the true character of my friend.

Good friends are loyal friends. And of course, loyalty is not simply seen in getting a beating for a mate. It's displayed in all sorts of ways through the thick and thin of life. A loyal friend is present when someone has been dumped or lost their job and are in tears. A loyal person sticks by their friend during periods of long-term depression, when the person they used to laugh with no longer laughs at all. They are present via email or zoom when their friend moves to a location far away and feels incredibly lonely. Loyal friends work hard to figure out how they will remain loyal to a friend who is not experiencing the same life transitions they are, be it full-time employment, marriage, kids or whatever. I don't know about you, but the biggest challenge to loyalty I find in friendship is long distance. Busyness overtakes me, and I find that I simply just don't get around to contacting my long-distance friends as often as I would like. But if "a friend loves at all times," then I have to wrestle with that challenge don't I? Because loyal friends don't just concede defeat in the face of distance, or life-transition or times of distress – they are committed to someone. Now

the friendships will look different when someone moves, or has children, or develops a chronic condition, there will have to be give and take in the face of new circumstances. But loyalty will lead a genuine friend to think about ways they can meet some of these challenges. One way someone encouraged me to demonstrate loyalty to my long-distance friends was to capitalise on otherwise dead time in travel between work/college and home. My life may feel busy but I still have those moments in the car where I could turn off the radio and give my friend in another state a call.

Good friends are loyal friends.

Honest

A good friend is also Honest. Proverbs 27:5-6

*⁵ Better an open reprimand
than concealed love.*

*⁶ The wounds of a friend are trustworthy,
but the kisses of an enemy are excessive.*

Honesty within friendship can be one of the hardest things to give and one of the hardest things to receive – particularly in a culture where we often relate through constant affirmation and praise.

I remember getting a good dose of honesty from a genuine friend a number of years ago. I lived in a share house at the time and there was a culture in the house where people would drop over regularly and lots of hanging out and chatting would occur –

often late into the night. His remarks went something like this. Chris, it's great isn't it that we have a culture of hanging out and talking at our house. It's great that people can share opinions and be encouraged, there's just something that you say from time to time that I feel is unhelpful. You see, often after people have shared their opinions in any particular conversation, you have a bit of habit of finishing the conversation by starting your sentences with, "well the reality is..." This might make people feel that you don't really value them or their opinions or at worst are have just been waiting to deliver the ultimate verdict on the issue. Maybe you've given that kind of honest rebuke to a friend. Maybe you've received it.

Now why did I bother paying any attention to this honest rebuke? Because I knew He was a genuine friend that loved me and didn't want me to continue to be a jerk – he didn't "hid" his love but brought it into the open. And that's the distinguishing feature of honesty within genuine friendship – it comes from a desire to love a friend and see them built up not torn down. Therefore, *wounds from a genuine friend* are trustworthy.

This doesn't mean that genuine friends look for any and every opportunity to be brutally honest about any minor failing – and sometimes we need to think about whether our expectations of our friends are realistic – but it does mean that out of love for your friends, you will from time to time need to speak up. As the proverb says, it's an enemy who will be content to someone continue in sin and bad habits - their "kisses will be excessive, that is, they will constantly affirm you so that you don't change. Thus, we get Proverbs 28:23:

*23 One who rebukes a person will later find more favor
than one who flatters with his tongue.*

Constant flattery and affirmation when actually a loving rebuke is needed is only going to be destructive. A genuine friend will love you enough to be honest with you. We always have a choice when a significant issue comes up in our friendship. We can keep quiet about it? But that ultimately doesn't solve anything. Often it leads to silent bitterness and a slow decay in the friendship. Or we can show loving honesty. There might be some initial pain, but you pray that your motives are right in speaking (that you not just being petty) and that your friend trusts you enough to hear it. Are you being honest with your friends? Are you letting your friends be honest with you? A wise friend is honest.

Careful

A good friend is careful. Proverbs 25:20:

*20 Singing songs to a troubled heart
is like taking off clothing on a cold day
or like pouring vinegar on soda.*

Good friends read the situation and respond accordingly. They are socially aware enough to know what to say or do and what not to say or do. A good example of this is the initial actions of Job's three friends in Job chapter 2. Job had lost everything: family, property, even his own health. Hearing what had happened three of Job's friends set out to go and sympathise and comfort him. Job 2:12,

¹² When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads.¹³ Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

Job's friends read the moment and responded accordingly. They didn't try and make him happy again by singing songs, they didn't pester him with all sorts of questions about how he was feeling and what he was going to do next. No, they rightly demonstrated genuine and appropriate anguish and then simply sat with Job in quite compassion.

Genuine friends are careful in their friendships, they think about the words they say before they say them. A good friend won't be like: "Oh, I'm sorry to hear you failed your subject, but speaking of uni, it turns out I've just landed the exact placement I was hoping for!" Good friends are careful not to "sing songs of joy, to a troubled heart."

But Proverbs also teaches us that we need to be careful with our humour in friendships. And this is a real issue in Aussie culture because we love our sarcasm. We love our practical jokes. We love to tease in "good fun." But listen to Proverbs 26:18

¹⁸ *Like a madman who throws flaming darts and deadly arrows,*

¹⁹ *so is the person who deceives his neighbour*

and says, "I was only joking!"

This verse makes me think of the Joker villain in the Batman series. A madman who thinks he's having a good laugh, when in actual fact, he's hurting everyone in sight. We don't want to be like that.

I think there can be a place for banter among friends, but how many of us have felt that deep hurt when our so-called friends make a comment about our appearance or our character, or a particular skill we lack, only to see the look on our face and say, "oh, I was only joking." I wonder how many of you have been the but of a humiliating practical joke by a so called friend, only for them to come back to you and say, you're alright aren't you? I was only joking.

Good friends are careful to act appropriately and say no to dumb words and acts of humour.

Trustworthy

A good friend is trustworthy. They keep confidences and they do what they say they will do.

First, they keep confidences - Proverbs 16:28,

A perverse man stirs up conflict,
and a gossip separates close friends.

Close friendship is marked by vulnerability: friends share their hopes, fears, dreams, anxieties. Much of what friends share is spoken in confidence and therefore friends need to be able to trust each other.

But also, trustworthy friends do what they say they will do. Proverbs 25: 14

¹⁴ Like clouds and wind without rain

is a man who boasts of gifts he does not give.

Ask any farmer during a drought of the pain of looking at promising clouds in a sky that refuse to break forth into rain.

Don't be a source of false hope for your friends. Don't be the sort of person who can't say no and makes commitments you can't be kept. Good friends are trustworthy, and trustworthy friends keep their word. If you say you're going to have a coffee with someone during the week, have the coffee. If you say that you'll go to visit someone within the next month, book it in. And if you can't do either of these things, make that clear from the beginning.

If trust is broken through thoughtless *gossip* or broken *promises* a friendship may be destroyed completely. Proverbs 18:19.

¹⁹ An offended brother is harder to reach^[2]

than a fortified city,

and quarrels are like the bars of a fortress.

Some of you may know the painful regret of breaking a friend's trust. The person you once found warm and open, now like fortified city – walls up, guard up.

Good friends are trustworthy and work hard not to lose that trust.

2. Who to have as a close friend.

The wisdom of Proverbs is clear about **what** makes a good friend: loyal, honest, careful and trustworthy. But Proverbs is also clear about **who** the wise should choose as close friends. Now this is not something we think heaps about. Often we give a lot of our thought to **who** we could *date or marry*, but I wonder how much we consider **who** we will enter into deep *friendship* with. But Proverbs is clear that wisdom in friendship will lead people to think about **who** they enter into intimate and vulnerable friendship with. Proverbs 12:26.

*⁶A righteous person is careful in dealing with his neighbour,^[a]
but the ways of the wicked lead them astray.*

(NIV: A righteous man is cautious in friendship,
but the way of the wicked leads them astray.)

Now, we should be clear that we are talking about the bond of intimate friendship, those we consider close friends. As Christians, Jesus calls us to love all (Mark 12:31), gossips and fools included and in a sense we are called to be friendly to all, but not all will be or should be our close and intimate friend, those with whom we share a tight bond. Proverbs tells us to be discerning with that relationship.

So let's think now about **who** the wise should have as friends.

God's word says the wise **should** seek out those who will **build them up** in wisdom and avoid those who will **tear them down** through foolishness. Proverbs 13:20

*²⁰ The one who walks with the wise will become wise,
but a companion of fools will suffer harm.*

Now Proverbs has already told us what a wise friend looks like: they are loyal, honest, careful and trustworthy. And the wise will also seek out close friends who will encourage them to be wise, whose counsel is sound and trustworthy, not deceptive or mere flattery. Proverbs 27:9

*Oil and incense bring joy to the heart,
and the sweetness of a friend is better than self-counsel.*

Or ESV – “the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel.”

Just remember, that although you have a friend that may smell, it’s still possibly for him or her to be like perfume to your heart through their wise counsel.

But what about those who will tear us down and hurt us, people’s whose life and character is mark by consistent and habitual unhelpful behaviour. Who does Proverbs tells us to avoid. Well, a few specific examples are given to us.

The wise will avoid having **a gossip** as a friend. Proverbs 20:19

*¹⁹ The one who reveals secrets is a constant gossip;
avoid someone with a big mouth.*

If you don't want your trust destroyed and your personal life exposed to others, avoid the pain and don't have someone who consistently gossips as your friend.

The wise will avoid having a **short-tempered friend**. Proverbs 22:24

*²⁴ Don't make friends with an angry person,^[a]
and don't be a companion of a hot-tempered one,
²⁵ or you will learn his ways
and entangle yourself in a snare.*

Whether it's anger or lack of self-control in other areas, the wise avoid such people knowing that they too may be ensnared by the bad habit and they too may reap the consequences.

The wise will avoid having a **fool** as a friend. Proverbs 14:7

*⁷ Stay away from a foolish person;
you will gain no knowledge from his speech.*

If you are wanting to grow in wisdom and the fear of the Lord, then don't have a fool as a close friend – someone who persistently mocks both God and His wisdom and who tends to lead you into all sorts of dumb and ungodly decisions.

We need to listen to these warnings of Proverbs. God is telling you to avoid the pain of being used, betrayed and hurt in friendship by heeding His wisdom. Love all, be being kind, generous and hospitable to all, but chose your close friends wisely.

Now it may be that some of you need contexts in which to discover and develop close friendships with people who will build you up. I remember when I was in high school, I struggled to find even one mate who I could trust to be a wise friend who I'd want to share myself with. So maybe it means all of us need to think intentionally about providing opportunities for one another to meet people and make good friendships. It might be group dinners after church or semi-regular social get-togethers. You might find it by investing more and more in your mid-week GG. Maybe all of us need to work harder at pushing through language or cultural barriers to find the joy of a new friend in someone who is outwardly different from us yet who we inwardly resonate with. Wise friends choose wisely but also make opportunities for good friendships to develop.

3. How Jesus helps us.

Some of you may have listened to this talk and thought, "it's all well and good to talk about the ideal of friendship, but **How** do I deal with some of the real disappointments and griefs of friendship that are real in my life?"

Well, there may be two camps of people who are here this morning:

Those of you who recognise their failings as a good and wise friend, and those who feel continually disappointed by their friends.

There's hope in both situations and that hope comes from trusting our lives to Jesus Christ – the One who is so much greater than any human friend could be. In Luke 7:34 the religious rulers of the day even label Jesus “the friend of sinners” because of His willingness to associate with people whom they thought had no hope. But Jesus is much more than a mere “friend” to sinners, He is our Lord and saviour, the Son of God who shows unfailing commitment and love to you by laying down His own life for you at the cross.

So, If you think you've been an average friend – someone who struggles being loyal when things get hard or honest when things need to be said. Someone who falls into thoughtless comments or leaks like a sieve when it comes to other people's confidences. You need to remember that the Lord Jesus can *change* you. You don't have to be stuck in your sinful habits. Jesus has loved you enough to die for your sins and make you a new creation. Jesus doesn't just leave you to your own will power to change, but gives you His Holy Spirit to help you be that better friend as you seek to live in obedience to Jesus. So don't be downcast, accept godly rebuke if need be - apologize to friends you believe you have wronged and simply live in obedience to Jesus now knowing He has loved you, is gracious to you and is changing you.

But maybe you're someone who feels continually disappointed by friends? You've shared yourselves with people hoping that they'll be there for the long haul, only to find out they're flaky and unreliable when circumstances change. Maybe you've put so much effort into investing in someone only to feel that it's just not reciprocated. Maybe you've been offended by a hurtful comment, or an experience of gossip.

I'm sorry if you've gone through that. Unfortunately, it is a sad reality that in this sinful world that even the best human relationships will disappoint us or fail to meet some of our expectations. But the gospel says that in Jesus you have someone who is utterly committed to you, who will never leave you or forsake you, who gave up His own life that you, as sinner, could become a child of God and inherit eternal life.

And Jesus teaches us to demonstrate the kind of love He shows to us, to others even when they disappoint us. He teaches us to show loving honesty, grace and forgiveness with our friends as they will from time to time disappoint us in what they say or do. Jesus is not telling us to do something he Himself did not do. He knew what it was like for *his* closest friends to betray him in his hour of need. And yet he still extended the hand of grace to them – and to you.

Colossians 3:12-14

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and dearly loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a grievance against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you are also to forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

How do we be the good and gracious friend God wants us to be?

Knowing the love the Lord Jesus has for us frees us up to be both a good friend and a gracious friend. As we trust our lives to Jesus, listening to Him and doing what He

says (which includes the heeding the wisdom of Proverbs) we can start to become that good friend that God wants us to be.

Let's pray