

Friendship

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[0 : 0 0] I said the book of Proverbs is different in a lot of ways to a lot of the books that we're used to. It's different in a lot of ways to the rest of the books in the Bible.

But it's great to be able to gather together all that it says on these various different themes and try and look at the big picture, the guidance, the very practical day-to-day wisdom that it gives us in these different areas and today in this area of friendship.

Muhammad Ali, the great boxer, once said this about friendship. Friendship is the hardest thing in the world to explain. It is not something you learn in school. But if you haven't learned the meaning of friendship, you really haven't learned anything.

That's true to a degree, isn't it? We don't get kind of friendship classes in school. In some ways, we're left to work it out. What does it mean to be a friend? So often we learn that through trial and error. That can be a tough journey.

But as we've just seen, as we look through these verses, we can learn about friendship in the Bible. We can learn about friendship in the book of Proverbs in particular. That's what we want to do this morning.

[1 : 0 5] The book of Proverbs speaks a lot about friendship. Why? Because friendship is important. Friends, according to the Bible, friends are not just kind of an accessory as we go through life that might be nice to have.

But rather, the quality of our friends, the quality of our friendships, makes a huge difference to the quality and to the direction of our lives and to those around us.

And so it's great to be able to gather together the Bible's wisdom on friendship and learn from that. Just before we dive straight into these verses, I want us to remember what we've already seen in the last few weeks in the book of Proverbs.

We've talked a lot about this big picture. We've talked a lot about how this is a book full of wisdom, a book all about wisdom. What is wisdom? Wisdom, biblically speaking, is living well in the world that God has created.

Living well in God's creation. It's an incredibly practical thing. And so we're going to see over the next few weeks, it includes friendship. It includes our speech. It includes anger. All things that we're going to take some time to look at.

[2 : 1 3] But what we always need to remember is that the key to that, the key to wisdom, the big picture, is rightly relating to the God who made everything. Being in a right relationship with the God who made the universe.

The book of Proverbs calls it the fear of the Lord. And we spoke about that not as a fear that causes us to run away from God, but as a kind of reverent awe. A genuine fear that recognizes who he is in relation to who we are.

That he is the creator, we are the creation. That he is perfect, that we are not. That he is infinite, that we are finite. And so the right response to that, as we saw last week, is to trust in him.

To trust in the Lord with all our heart. Not to rely on ourselves. Not to rely on what we think we know. Not to rely on our wisdom. But to recognize our dependence on God. And again, time and time again, we see how that points us to Jesus.

That it is only through Jesus. That it is only through the gospel. That in Jesus, God himself came. That he has lived this life of perfect wisdom. And yet he suffered and died in our place for our foolishness, for our mistakes.

[3 : 24] And that he rose again. It is only through fully trusting in that gospel, in that Jesus, that we can have this right relationship with God. That makes real wisdom possible in the day-to-day, in the nitty-gritty.

That dependence on his love for us. That means we can live wisely in the day-to-day things like friendship. And so we need to remember that big picture. I found it helpful, that picture we said last week.

Imagining kind of the book of Proverbs like a tank of fish. These individual topics. Friendship, anger, speech. Being these little fish swimming around. But we need to keep them in that big tank of water.

Which is the big picture of Proverbs. The fear of the Lord. Trusting in God. If we take them out of that water, they will suffer. And they will die. And they will become meaningless.

Otherwise, there are loads of blogs. There are loads of social media posts. There are loads of books around giving worldly wisdom on what a good friend looks like. On how to be a good friend.

[4 : 23] You can Google that. You'll find a whole list of things. And a lot of those things will be good advice. A lot of those things will say things that we are going to say this week from the book of Proverbs. And yet if they are just kind of sound bites separated from this big picture of biblical godly wisdom.

Those sound bites will never have the transforming power or the foundation to help us live that out. As if we keep this teaching rooted into the wisdom of the gospel.

Because ultimately, to kind of let the cat out of the bag right at the beginning, ultimately friendship is pointing us to Jesus. Jesus says to his disciples, John chapter 15, verse 15, No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing, but I have called you friends.

Jesus is the ultimate friend. And we are going to see as we look through these different characteristics of friendships, how Jesus fulfills each and every one of these. And how it's only if we first accept his friendship to us that we're then able to truly show this friendship to one another.

So let's dig into these proverbs. These are not all the proverbs on friendship. They're a pretty good cross-section, I think. A fairly comprehensive list. And it seems to me there are four big ideas, four key characteristics which the book of wisdom say that a good friend possesses.

[5 : 49] And we're going to look through these fairly quickly, each one, and then finish off with a couple of thoughts. One more thing that's really important as we begin. It will be very easy to listen to this this morning and say, oh yeah, this all makes sense.

This sounds like good stuff. Why are other people not more like this? It will be very easy to look at the book of proverbs and say, oh, why are my friends so useless? It's easy whenever we read a challenging part of the Bible, isn't it, to say, you know who really needs to hear this?

Someone else. You know, they need to start doing that. Well, perhaps they do. But the challenge here for us this morning is to say, how can I be this friend? How can I change?

How can I make this first move? Just as God, through Jesus, the perfect friend, made that first move to us. So four things, four characteristics of the good friend.

You'll see them there on the sheet. The first one is that a good friend is consistent. The friend in proverbs is someone who is there in thick and thin.

[6 : 46] Have a look at those top verses. A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity. A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

Do not forsake your friend and your father's friend. Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away. The well-known theme tune to the TV series Friends says that all, doesn't it?

I'll be there for you. The book of proverbs says that's right. That is the starting point of true friendship. It is being someone who is there. It is being someone who is present.

It is being someone there in the ups and in the downs. It is being someone who can be relied on. I want to straight away think, well, actually, what does that mean?

And it means this. It means that you will not be able to be best friends with everyone. The type of friendship that proverbs is going to speak about is not something that we're going to be able to do for every single person we meet.

[7 : 45] As the book of proverbs says, we may have many companions, but we will have fewer close friends. That's not a kind of cold-hearted thing to say. That doesn't mean that we don't make the kind of effort always to be welcoming and kind to other people.

But this kind of friendship where we are always there for a person, a person is always there for us, is likely to be something that is more rare, that is more concentrated in a small group.

As a church, now that the young guys have gone out, there must still be maybe 50, 60 of us in this room. Not all of these people, you will always be able to be there for them. Not all of them will always be able to be there for you.

But, but, the encouragement, the point here, the challenge, is that we should all be that for someone or some people. And in this church, we should all have those friends somewhere.

Just because we say that we can't be this to everyone doesn't mean that we're this for no one. All of us need someone who is this consistent friend. Someone physically present.

[8 : 48] It says they're not a neighbor who is far away. This isn't talking about a Facebook friend or someone on the end of a Skype call or someone you see every Christmas. Those relationships could be really helpful. But someone in the community who is present, who is consistent, who is there for you.

And I'm really aware that straight away that perhaps raises the question in your mind, doesn't it? Well, do I have that friend? What if I don't have that friend? What if we don't have that friend?

Well, I think the answer that Proverbs gives would be to say, seek that out. The book of Proverbs does not tell us so much about friendship just because he says it would be a happy kind of chance if this happened to you.

The book of Proverbs makes us seek out good friends because they're important. To be willing to humble ourselves and ask for this help. To be willing to tell people when we're struggling, when we're not okay.

To be in and around people. And we can't guarantee people's response to that, but it gives us that chance for those friendships to begin. But I think even more than that is to think, as we said before, who am I being this friend to?

[9 : 53] Who am I there for? Who can I help? Who looks like they're struggling? The best way to make these types of friendships is to be this type of friend.

But ultimately, the good news again is that Jesus is the perfect friend who is always there for us. Again, the Proverbs on friendship are pointing us to Jesus. He is the friend who sticks closer than a brother.

That doesn't mean we don't need friends. But it does mean that we are never truly alone. As we've been thinking about prayer, it means we always have someone who we can talk to. And more than that, someone who can and who has acted on our behalf.

Jesus' final words to his disciples before his ascension, his return to heaven. Jesus' promise to each one of us. Surely I am with you always to the end of the age.

Jesus is that consistent friend. And because he is always there for us, because he is present, because he will not let us down, because in him we have this rock-solid foundation, that enables us to be this consistent friend for others.

[10 : 59] A friend people can rely on because in Jesus we have the friend that we can rely on. So a friend is consistent. They are present. They are there for us. But alongside that, they're sensitive.

To be a good friend means being aware of how other people are doing. What will help them and what will not at this particular time with the particular stuff that's going on in their life.

I put some of these Proverbs down in that second section. These might have some of my favorite Proverbs, I think, are in this section. Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house, lest he have his fill of you and hate you. When I went to university, I didn't used to cook much.

And after I'd got bored of pot noodles, I kind of mastered the art of dropping into certain friends' houses at certain times, knowing that there's a pretty good chance I'll get fed here. And I imagine, after I'd left, I don't think my friends knew Proverbs that well, but I imagine they would have thoroughly agreed with this proverb from time to time.

And it's that kind of recognition that actually friendship is not supposed to be overbearing. But more than that, I think it's recognition that sometimes you can do the right thing, but at the wrong time.

[12 : 07] And this is really starting to get towards real wisdom, isn't it? That life is not always black and white. That life is not formulaic. It's not so simple.

Well, if I do this, then this will always be the result. To do something for one person at a time might be completely appropriate. At other times, it might be completely inappropriate.

Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day and like vinegar on soda. It's good to sing, to celebrate, to be joyful with each other. Perhaps we feel great.

But a good friend takes into account, well, how are other people feeling? We don't go on about how great everything is, how peachy life is when people have a heavy heart, when they're struggling.

To be wise means acting appropriately, the right thing at the right time. It's the same idea as whoever blesses his neighbor in a loud voice rising early in the morning will be counted as cursing.

[13 : 06] It's well-meaning. It's incredibly annoying. I need to run through this proverb with my daughters. They're very enthusiastic first thing, but actually wisdom says, how will this be received rather than simply, what do I think I'm saying?

What is this person going through? How will what I say interact with that? Am I really listening to them so that I can respond wisely, respond as a good friend would?

Am I sensitive of their situation or am I just kind of plowing ahead doing what I always do? And again, ultimately, this is pointing us to Jesus. The Bible tells us in the book of Hebrews that Jesus is not unable to sympathize with our weakness, but that he has in every respect been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

The Bible, the incarnation, God himself coming to earth, makes it clear that God understands that the mess and the pain and the struggles of real life.

We just sung in that song, Jerusalem, Jesus knew scorn and laughter. Jesus knew suffering and pain. Jesus has been to the very bottom of the barrel, far deeper than we will ever go.

[14 : 18] Jesus is sensitive to our situation. He doesn't come to us saying, isn't everything brilliant? He doesn't say to us, well, if you believe it, if you just followed me, everything would always be rosy. Life would be a walk in the park.

Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses. He's sensitive to our needs. He understands life in a fallen world in which we live. And again, it is because he understands us.

It is because our Lord and Savior has fully experienced what we are going through, that we are able, that we remember to then consider others, to rejoice with those who rejoice, and yet also to weep with those who weep, as the Bible calls us to, as the Bible equips us to.

We have the great privilege of singing from the Psalms each week, the book of Psalms, a great book full of songs of joy, and yet also full of songs of lament, songs of sorrow.

And there are times when we all go through these things, these different seasons of the soul. To be a wise friend, to be a good friend, it is to be a friend who is sensitive to that. What is this person going through?

[15 : 22] How can I act in a way that is helpful for where they are right now? So consistent, sensitive. Third characteristic you see there is honest.

And I think this is a huge one, isn't it? What makes a good friend? Is it someone who is nice to you? Well, the book of Proverbs says more than someone who is nice to you, it is someone who is honest with you. It is someone who says the truth even when that can hurt.

I find it really very challenging reading these Proverbs this week. Do I enjoy it when people are honest with me about things I'm getting wrong or things I could improve?

Of course. I take it really well and I say thank you for that insightful critique. I will certainly act on that, you wise and true friend. But some of you might not react in that way.

You know, of course that's not true. If you're anything like me, you know, you'll huff and you'll bristle and everything in us wants to say, what would that person know? Why can that person not just leave me alone? This is my thing.

[16 : 22] This is really hard. And look at the language the book of Proverbs uses. It knows that. It says faithful are the wounds of a friend. This can hurt. It says whoever rebukes a man will afterward find more favor.

This might not go down well at the time. And yet these are the friends that we need. These are the friends who will show us where we are going wrong.

These are the friends who will truly love us enough to point us back to the right track. Friends who care enough about us not to just take the easy route. It will often seem kinder to say nothing.

It will certainly feel easier. But as that proverb says there, that is spreading a net for people's feet. That is a trap. That is not helping. These are the kind of honest friends that we need.

And of course, again, these are the friends that we're called to be. People who are willing to speak up, be honest, risk short-term pain for another's long-term gain, to risk our comfort for the good of another person.

[17 : 24] Now, this absolutely does not mean being the person who kind of picks up on every fault. This is not an excuse for kind of scoring points by highlighting all the mistakes that people make.

That kind of friendship won't last long, and rightly so. Proverbs 27, verse 9 there, This is the kind of honesty that comes from genuine concern, genuine love.

This is not kind of casual criticism. It's earnest counsel. It is done from love. Done for the good of the other person. It's done having first checked, and then prayed about, and then rechecked my own motives before I speak this.

This kind of honesty, ultimately, it builds on that consistency that we've already spoken about. It's the friend who is there through thick and thin. The friend who has offered praise and encouragement in the good times.

Who has noticed we're struggling in the hard times. That is the friend who has won this right to correct and rebuke lovingly. It is the friend who is sensitive to what is going on in someone's life.

[18 : 28] Who listens. Who sees the big picture. Who is able to speak the hard truths, but at the right time and in the right way. It is not just kind of dropping in whenever suits us.

Kind of unloading both barrels and then jetting off again and saying, Why are you so upset? That's what the Bible says. No, that is not genuine wisdom. That is not genuine friendship. Genuine honesty is building on a listening relationship.

That is real friendship. That is real wisdom. And again, we find this true honesty in the true friend that is Jesus. If you want little Jesus kind of meek and mild that the Bible is not really the place to find that Jesus.

That is not how the Bible presents in Jesus. It is brutally honest with us. Jesus does not beat around the bush. Jesus tells us that we are in a dire situation.

He tells us that we are sinful people. That we have fallen short of God's perfect standard. That we will never reach that standard. How can we take those as the words of a loving friend?

[19 : 36] Well, it is because we know that he is one who is there. We know he is one who is sensitive. And it is also because we know that Jesus is the one who has done something about that problem. This is your problem, Jesus says.

You are isolated from God. You have chosen the wrong paths. You have not been wise in all that you have done. But I will come. And I will suffer in your place. I will lay down my life, Jesus says.

In order that you can be reconciled to God. And that is Jesus' honesty and love in action. And it is only as we get that. If we accept Jesus' loving friendship.

If we accept the truth of his honesty about us. It is only as we grasp that. That we can then be loving and honest to others. Because it is only if we get that. That we are not then claiming when we help people.

That we have got it all sorted. But you have not. And look, here is where you are not to scratch. Here and here and here and here. Instead, if we listen to Jesus as he honestly speaks about us. We are able to come alongside people humbly.

[20 : 37] One broken person helping another broken person to grow together. Remembering the ultimate way that we grow is to look to Jesus. And look to the friendship that he offers.

And the friendship that he has demonstrated above all other things at the cross. So consistent, sensitive, honest. The last characteristic of friends that keeps coming up in the book of Proverbs.

Is that they are influential. They are influential. In some ways this is a bit different to the others. We are striving to be consistent, sensitive, honest. That is good. Proverbs says that the people we spend our time with.

Whether we like it or not. Will be influential. This is a given. The only question is in which way will we be influenced. Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise.

But the companion of fools will suffer harm. Our friends shape us. Our friends direct us. We know that, don't we? What do people worry about for their children?

[21 : 37] We don't want them to fall in with a bad crowd. They want good influences for their life. That doesn't stop with childhood, does it? We are shaped by who we spend time with.

Good friends are there to help us choose wise paths. We run our ideas past people because we recognize actually we've not got all the wisdom we need.

We don't know it all. Other people will see things we miss. Other people have experiences we haven't got. The book of Proverbs says it is good, it is wise to listen to the right people.

I suppose a challenge here then is to say, does that mean, is the book of Proverbs saying that we should only be hanging around with nice people? If we think wisdom ultimately comes from God, should we only kind of hang around with people from the church?

Is that what it's saying here? Well, I think that can't be right. Because when we look at Jesus' example, he spent his time with people who are so often those who are looked down on. Who were outsiders.

[22 : 36] It was not all the nice folk. It was not the great and the good and the wise. These verses are not calling us to kind of retreat like monks. We need to live in the real world.

And yet it's a reminder, a link back to that. Again, that big idea of Proverbs. Who are we listening to? Which voices are we taking to heart? Of course we should have friends at school and at work and at various clubs and groups and whatever else we do.

It's really important we have those relationships. But it's also so important that we have these friendships, these relationships where we'll be speaking the gospel truth in love to one another.

Where people will be able to speak honestly to us about biblical things. It's something we've spoken about quite a lot already this year. We grow as Christians. We become more wise.

Not just through a Sunday morning service. But we grow as a community of people reminding each other of the truths of the Bible. The truths of Jesus. Being that iron sharpening iron.

[23 : 38] That is true friendship. That is not an accessory. That is an essential part of Christianity. That is how we have been made. That is why it is wise.

It acts in line with the God who created us. Because that is how we grow. And that leads us then to the two things that I want us really to finish with. To kind of sum all this up with this big idea of friendship.

What difference does that make to us as a church? And the first one. First thing I want to talk about very briefly is this. Pastoral care. What is pastoral care? It's kind of the churchy sort of word, isn't it?

It really just means how are people doing? How are people being looked after? Are people struggling? What's happening for those who are struggling? As a church, how do we do pastoral care?

Well, I'm convinced. This is what we said from the beginning of starting this church. And I continue to be convinced of it. That this type of friendship is exactly how pastoral care happens day by day in the church.

[24 : 38] Pastoral care is not me kind of dropping in every few months to solve everyone's problems. Although I'm keen to visit. Keen to see people. Keen to talk things through. Pastoral care is not waiting until some kind of crisis or some really bad thing has happened.

And then getting a group of us to go and stage an intervention somewhere. Although as a church, we want to help out. And we should be involved when unexpected things suddenly arise. But that cannot be the total of what we call pastoral care.

Predominantly, the way we care for one another in the church is through this sort of friendship. It's having people who are consistent, who are there for us. It's having people who are sensitive, who recognize what we're going through.

People who are honest, who will tell us the hard truths. And in that way are influential in our lives, guide us in good paths. It is having those people. It is being those people, being those friends to other people.

And that is why God brings us together as a church to support one another. That is what it means for the Bible to speak about the church being a body building itself up together in love.

[25 : 47] And that is the Bible's picture of the church, why it so often uses this language of one another within the church. And the church is not a top-down thing. The church is a community helping one another, driven forward by constantly gathering around the world of God.

I want to really encourage that, really kind of push that, I suppose, this year as we grow as a church. We want more people to join our church. But everyone who joins, everyone who's here already, will have joys and challenges.

Everyone in this church needs cared for pastorally. That is not limited to a few people. Everyone in this church has something to offer others. On Wednesday evenings, we're going to start going through in our community groups, after half term, just a little study book.

It's a bit different to what we've done previously. A little booklet called Caring for One Another. Just a really simple way of helping us to think, how can we be doing this well, this friendship well for one another?

How can we put this into practice? I'd love it if we could get a good number of people coming along to that, so that we could be this church community who shows this real friendship, lives out this real practical outworking of wisdom with one another.

[27 : 00] And so pastoral care, I think, completely fits in with what we're talking about here, about friendship, being good friends to one another. But also the idea of mission, the idea that we're here as a church, not just for the people who are already here, but that we want to reach more people with the good news of Jesus.

That's not us kind of empire building. That's us just thinking that we have the best possible news in the world to share, and we want people to hear that, to understand that. We just said this is not friendship just for inside the church.

This isn't a special friendship to be reserved for Christians. These are the kind of friends we should be to people in the world around us. A whole lot of people are suspicious of Christians.

You don't need me to tell you that. Some may have very good reasons for that. Some may have been hurt in the past. Some people might just be wary of people believing something different to what they do.

Some people might have heard all sorts of strange things about Christians that aren't even true. But Christians should be the best friends in the world. People's suspicions of Christianity should be broken down when they meet genuine Christians who show them consistency, sensitivity, honesty, or a positive influence.

[28 : 18] And we should be the kind of friends that people love to have. And why is that? Well, it's because, again, in Jesus we have the perfect model of friendship. It's because as a church we are not following a set of rules about friendship.

We are following the one who has been the perfect friend to us. And so we're able to show that to others. Not just by following his example but also by resting in his love.

If we have his friendship that is always there that will never let us down. His friendship who is sensitive to our needs yet honest about our failings and has done something about that at the cross.

If we have that friend who has given everything for us. And that is what frees us to be these committed friends who lovingly serve and give to those around us.

And it's as we do that, as we are pointing people to that perfect love and perfect friend. That we are pointing people to that one who is there for everyone. Jesus Christ. The one who longs to be our friend.

[29 : 21] The one who has suffered in order to be our friend. The one who holds out that invitation to be our friend. In order that we might know God and be with him forever.