

“A Friend Loves at All Times,” Proverbs 17:9, 17; 18:24; 25:17, 20; 26:18-19; 27:6, 9, 14, 17; 28:23; 29:5 (Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost, September 8, 2019)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Whoever blesses his neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing (27:14).

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

Whoever rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with his tongue (28:23).

A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet (29:5).

## PRAY

We are spending five weeks studying the subject of relationships on Sunday mornings and typically when a minister gets up and says, “I’m going to teach on relationships,” he really means “I am going to teach on marriage, or the family,” or something like that. It’s very tempting, because we know that for so many people who attend church this is a felt need, and as a pastor you want to teach on the subjects that will most easily get the attention of the people.

Lord willing, next week we will devote an entire sermon to marriage. It is a vital topic. But I do think that we have been guilty in the church of placing outsized importance on marriage and

family. There's something else we need to know or we won't really be any good at marriage or being parents.

What is it? Friendship. *Friendship is absolutely vital if we are to flourish as human beings, and it's especially important to talk about it now because no generation has ever been as bad at friendship as ours is.* We live in a lonely society now. As one recent article put it, "Social isolation on the scale found throughout the countries of the West is now exacting serious health costs that can be expected to rise as the Baby Boom generation enters its final years. Yet while senior citizens are the most visible objects of concern, they are not the only people so affected ... nearly half of all Americans report 'sometimes or always' feeling alone, and ... Generation Z – those born between 1995 and 2010—is the loneliest generation of all."

What can the Bible in general, and the book of Proverbs in particular, teach us about friendship? Three things: first, the characteristics of friendship (what is a friend?). Second, the priority of friendship (why is it so important?). Third, the power for friendship (how can we do this?).

First, the characteristics of friendship (what is a friend?). In a day where it's entirely possible to have thousands of "friends" on social media, we need to define this term. "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." Proverbs 18:24. This verse is important because it distinguishes between companionship and friendship.

**Companions are people with whom you share some common interest.** They are the people you went to Ole Miss with, those with whom you work, the people in your neighborhood or who have children the same age as your children, they are the people in your church. The research suggests that, unless you are brand new to Oxford, everyone in this room has anywhere from a dozen to more than one hundred of these companions in this town. It's why so many people love to go to the Grove on gameday. They want to see everyone.

Companionship is great and it would be impossible for society to survive without it. We shouldn't belittle it. But companionship is not the same thing as friendship.

What makes a friend? Three things: first, friends, unlike companions, are constant. Again, Proverbs 18:24: "A man of many companions may come to ruin, **but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.**"

Companions are people you hang out with, but they aren't expected to be there when you need them. If you get sick, if you lose your job, or if there is some tragic accident that befalls your family, companions are those who send a card. Friends, however, are those who come right and in and start to help.

A little over three years ago there was a tragic event in Oxford. It was a Sunday morning, and we got news that six people in our town died in a plane crash over in Alabama. Because two of them attended Grace Bible, I went over to the house. I was the pastor so I was needed to be there, but because I wasn't all that close with those who died I was there more or less in an official capacity. I offered prayer, I helped to plan the funeral, but I wasn't there as a friend, so I had to knock on the front door when I arrived and wait for someone to answer.

But I noticed that others in our church and in our community didn't knock; they walked right in. They knew the family, they knew how to care for them, they knew where the utensils were in the kitchen to prepare food, they knew what to get out of the closet for the children to wear.

Companions knock, companions have to ask permission. ***But friends are so present and so close that they don't have to ask for permission. They walk right in and get to work.***

*Second, friends are also candid with one another.* Proverbs 27:6: "Faithful are the **wounds** of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy." Proverbs 28:23: "Whoever **rebukes** a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with his tongue." Proverbs 29:5: "A man who **flatters** his neighbor spreads a net for his feet."

To be a friend, it's not enough just to be there when there is a need or when disaster strikes. You also must be willing to say the hard things to someone. You can't just flatter. You must be willing to "wound" and "rebuke."

I do think where we live it is exceptionally hard to fulfill this part of friendship. We are a confrontation-averse culture. In the South, we tend to flatter people to their face, and act as if we like them. No matter who they are. Now behind your back we'll cut you to pieces, but to your face we tend to flatter.

But a true friend is someone who is around another person enough to know both their strengths and their weaknesses, their virtues and their flaws, and loves the other person enough to speak up when something is wrong and say, "This must stop."

We are all sinners. That means we all hurt people with our words, our actions, and our inactions. It means we will have some self-destructive aspect to our own personalities. If we see that in someone else's life but we never speak up, we're not their friend. As Becky Pippert puts it in one of her books: "Anger isn't the opposite of love. Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference." When you don't care enough to say the hard things, you're not a friend.

*Third, a friend is also considerate.* Proverbs 25:17: "Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house, lest he have his fill of you and hate you." Proverbs 26:18-19: "Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death is the man who deceives his neighbor and says, 'I am only joking!'" "Whoever blesses his neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing." Proverbs 27:14.

In these proverbs, you have someone trying to be a friend. You have someone who is trying to be there for the other person and lighten the mood. But they are so clueless about the emotional and psychological makeup of this other person that they've allowed themselves to become a pest. They meant well, but they've exhausted the patience of the person by staying too long or by coming over way too early in the morning. Plus, in an effort to lighten the mood, they've actually offended the other person. They were too harsh with their humor. They were, in other words, *inconsiderate*. Another way to say that is they were *rude*.

Consideration is the hardest characteristic of friendship to master because it takes so much wisdom and practice. It doesn't any wisdom to be constant – just be disciplined enough to spend a lot of time around the other person. It doesn't take a ton of wisdom to point out when someone else is sinning. It's easy to spot.

But it is so, so hard to carefully study, to *consider*, another person. Different people need you to treat them in different ways; you can't be considerate in the same way with everyone. Therefore, to be a friend you must study another person enough to know the right time to speak and the right balance of words that need to be said.

For example, a friend can look at you and say, "Now's not a good time to talk about this. I can tell he is overwhelmed. I'd better wait until the next time we go out to eat." A friend can look at you and say, "I need to offer this criticism, but if I do it now it will crush her. She needs to hear two or three positive things before she can hear this negative thing from me." A real friend knows the right words to use and knows how to frame the conversation so that you can take it more easily.

The other day my phone rings. I answer. It's one of my children. The first thing out of my child's mouth was, "Dad, I need you to get such and such for me on the way home." That was rather tactless, but it's my child so I didn't think much of it. But in the background I can hear my wife saying to the child, "How about first saying, 'Hello? How are you doing, Dad? How has your day been?'" She was trying to teach our child to consider me before they spoke.

Consideration is the glue that keeps all the other parts of friendship together. Without it, there can't be any friendship. That's the point of Proverbs 25:20: "Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on soda." Vinegar is acidic, and soda is alkaline, so when you combine the two you basically destroy them. They won't not be of any use in the kitchen once you mix them together.

So verse twenty is saying, "No matter how good your intentions are, if they grounded in consideration, if you try to comfort someone who is hurting but you don't know their emotional and psychological makeup, you're just going to irritate them. You'll be as clumsy as someone trying to sing with someone who is crying." You must consider to be a friend.

**But when you have someone in your life who is constant, candid, and considerate, then you have a friend and it is truly a gift from God.** In fact, I'll go so far to say that in the context of human relationships, friendship is the highest gift from God. How can I say that?

Second, the priority of friendship. The Bible says that ultimately friendships take priority over every other form of human relationship. How? Three reasons: *first, friendship is the foundational human relationship.* Any lifelong, meaningful, and trusting relationship you have with another person must ultimately become a friendship. Otherwise, it simply won't last.

Companionship won't last. As soon as the common interest disappears, as soon as the football season ends, or the hunting season, or the kids grow up, or you move jobs or neighborhoods, the companionship ends. There's no longer any reason to associate.

As a parent, when your kids get older, high school and certainly beyond, if that relationship doesn't turn more and more into a friendship, you won't have much of a relationship. Parents must remember that as they get older, our children do not remain our children; they become our peers. They become our brothers and sisters in Christ. At a certain age they cease being under our authority and we either relate to them as friends or we won't relate to them well at all.

Friendship takes priority even in a marriage. Paul says something extraordinary about marriage in 1 Corinthians 7. I'll paraphrase it for you. Paul writes to the people in Corinth and says, "Are you married? That's great. Are you single? That's great, too. You don't have to get married to be happy and marriage actually can be a gigantic headache." Seriously, that's verse 28: "Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I [want to] spare you that."

That was a revolutionary thing for Paul to say in that culture, where everything depended on having a family. There was virtually no notion of individual identity or success when Paul wrote these words in the first century. Your family had to prosper, or you were nothing.

It was revolutionary back then and, of course, it's revolutionary today. While marriage may be on a bit of a decline in our culture right now, romance is not. Romance and sex are preeminent. Every other movie, television show, and song is about it. The message from our culture is that unless you have those things in your life you can't possibly be happy or fulfilled.

The world has always viewed marriage and romance as foundational, but Paul says, "Eh. It's not that important. In fact, you might want to avoid it."

Why does he say that? It's not that Paul dislikes marriage. Marriage is a good thing. Proverbs 18:22 says, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing."

But Paul knows that what keeps a marriage together is not the romance. Ultimately, it's the friendship that will make a marriage or the lack of that will break it. Our culture says marriage or any kind of intimate relationship with the opposite sex must basically be about romance, with a little bit of friendship sprinkled on top. But anyone who's been happily married for more than a year knows that the best part of marriage is the friendship. ***A marriage without friendship is a disaster, it's just about the loneliest and most desperate place you can be, but it's wonderful to be married to your best friend.*** The friendship is foundational, it's the main course of marriage, and the romance, while great, is the seasoning. It helps bring out the flavor of the marriage.

If you're in middle school, high school, or early in college, I want to apply this to you specifically. Don't be in a rush to pair off in a long-term, exclusive dating relationship with someone of the opposite sex. Instead, make friends with different people, both boys and girls. Go on dates if you'd like, but don't pair off and instead learn how to be a friend. And then when you're old enough to be on your own, you can get married and have the relational skills to thrive.

*Second, friendship takes priority as the shaping relationship.* Proverbs 17:17 says, "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another." Do you remember how concerned your mother was about the people you hung out with in high school? Do you remember how she wanted you

stay away from some people and pushed you toward others? Do you know why she was like that? Because she was smart. She knew that your friends shape you, for good or bad. We like to think that we are self-made people, but it's not true. We are formed by the people around us. From birth until age 13 or so, it's our parents and siblings who shape us. But from 13 on, we are shaped by our friends. Friendship shapes us into who we will be.

*Third, friendship is the guaranteed relationship.* In Mark 10 we read where Jesus says to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel,<sup>30</sup> who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life." Mark 10:29-30.

The Bible does not promise that everyone will be married. We are not all promised a family in that sense. Marriage and family are good things, so if you want them but can't seem to get them that's a reason to grieve. That's hard.

But Jesus says do not lose heart. Do not despair, because the best part of having a spouse and the best part of having children is, ultimately, the friendship, and that is guaranteed to all God's people. **The best part is guaranteed, and inside Christianity we are all promised rich relationships with others and the end of loneliness.**

If you're here this morning and not a Christian, welcome. We are so glad you're here. But it may be that you have to leave a relationship in order to follow Jesus. Not marriage, but you may have to say goodbye to a boyfriend or a girlfriend. You may have to leave some companions behind, because they have no desire to go where Jesus is calling you. But no one will ever be alone who commits themselves to following Jesus. He promises them relational blessings beyond your wildest dreams if you will just trust him enough to seek it where he provides them.

But how can we trust what the Bible says enough to build our lives around Christian friendships above all else, instead of only chasing companionship or romance or building our lives around our kids?

Third, the power for friendships (or, how can we do this?). Our New Testament reading this morning was from John 15, and there Jesus calls us his friends. I want to show you two reasons Jesus gives why we should plow as much energy as we can into friendships.

First, Jesus says in John 15:15: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for *all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.*"

Now just think about this for a moment. "All I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." You know what that means? *There are no secrets in Christianity.* Sure, there are things we don't understand and things we may never comprehend about God and his purposes – he's infinite, so of course we can't wrap our minds around everything. But Jesus never deliberately keeps us in the dark. He wants us to know his business.

At Ole Miss, they are looking for a new chancellor. I double-dog dare you: go up to one of the College Board members and ask them, "Tell me the names at the top of the list." You know what they'll say? "It's none of your business." They don't want us to know. Granted, that's an important decision, and they need to exercise discretion. But it's not a matter of life or death. At the end of the day, it's just the head of a university.

But John 15 tells us that Jesus never does that, even when it is a matter of life and death, even when it is a matter of heaven or hell. Instead, he's given us 66 books in the Bible, and gifted people for two thousand years to teach it, and if we will just attend to them we can know both Jesus and his business.

He never says, "It's none of your business" or "obey me and don't question." In Christianity, there are no levels you must reach before you can be let in on the secrets.

This is why, by the way, Christian churches have always had windows. There are lots to love about being able to meet in the middle school but one thing I don't like is no windows. Churches have windows to communicate to the world, "We have nothing to hide, there are no secrets, this good news about Jesus is for everyone who will come." Jesus tells us, "You are my friends, my ministers, and ambassadors. You are responsible to help me carry out the plan of God reconciling the world to himself in me. I've trusted you with my plans. Now trust me. Love one another and pour yourself into friendships."

The second reason is found in verses 12-13: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." Christians talk all the time about how Jesus died for them. But why did he have to die? What was the point of his death? What does it mean?

Say you and your best friend were walking across the I-40 bridge across the Mississippi River at Memphis. That's a big, long, high bridge. I get nervous just thinking about walking across with all that traffic. Imagine that when you got to the middle of the bridge your friend said, "I want to show you how much I love you." Then he turned and jumped in front of a truck.

If that happened, would you say, "Wow! Look at how he loved me"? No, you'd say, "Oh, my goodness, my best friend was mentally ill and I didn't know it. I missed all the warning signs." That kind of death would teach you nothing about love.

But say you're on that same bridge and you're walking and suddenly a truck swerves and is about to run you down. But at the last second your friend pushes you out of the way and is hit by that truck instead. What would you say? You'd say, "Look at how my friend loved me!"

The Bible says the truck of God's wrath was bearing down on you because you are sinner and broken God's law. God is a just God and will punish all evil. But Jesus Christ bore the wrath so you wouldn't have to. He took your place. Why? Because you are his friend.

To the degree you believe Jesus did that for you, to that degree you will pour yourself into friendships. You won't be content with companionship and you won't make an idol out of

marriage and children. If you'll trust Jesus with your heart, he promises to give you all the friends you'll ever need. PRAY