



The Skill of Friendship

SERIES: *Wisdom for Back to School*

This morning we're picking our study in the book of Proverbs called "Wisdom for Back to School." Proverbs is a book filled with practical advise on a variety of subjects that deal with the kinds of issues we face at school or at work or just in doing life. Last week we saw what Proverbs had to say about our speech. Many of you told me how convicting that was. This morning I'm going to be a little easier on you, but not much. We're going to see what Proverbs says about friendship.

I don't think I have to tell you how important friendship is. Some of the most popular TV shows have been all about friendships. Of course one of them is called *Friends* because it's about six friends who are there for one another. Despite the low morals of the show most of us want what the characters on that show have: a circle of friends who will be there for them.

We also see the need for friends in the use of the internet. Besides chat rooms we have social networking web sites. The average number of "friends" most students have listed on their online profile is close to one hundred. Rob Hall told me he has 200 "friends" on Facebook. That's a lot of friends! But what does that mean?

Sadly, studies are showing that we have less people we can really confide in than past generations. In 1985, the average American had three people to talk to about matters that were important to them. In 2004, that number dropped to two. Perhaps even more striking, the number of Americans with no close friends rose from 10 percent in 1985 to 24.6 percent in 2004.

Our society does very little to help us in this area. Fifteen-year-olds spend months learning how to drive but rarely learn how to be a friend. College students spend years learning the skills of engineering or architecture but the skill of friendship is left up to osmosis. So we have a generation of people who aren't succeeding in this area and it affects every area of their lives.

Friendship is important in the Christian life. Jesus modeled friendship with his disciples. Jesus called us his friends. He came at least in part to create a community of friends who would unite under their common friendship with him. Jesus made this of utmost importance when he said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you." That's all about friendship. We can't be an effective witness in the community without friends. People ask me, how do you do evangelism at your church? What kind of programs do you have? How much do you budget for it? I tell them we don't program for it and we don't spend much on it because it's all about friendship.

There is no better place to learn about friendship than the book of Proverbs. We can divide up what Proverbs

says about friendship into two sections: choosing friends and being friends.

I. CHOOSING FRIENDS

When it comes to choosing friends Proverbs teaches us to be aware of a couple of things:

A. The influence of friends: First, it teaches us of the powerful influence friends have on us. As a result, we should choose our friends carefully. Look at 13:20: **"He who walks with wise men will be wise, But the companion of fools will suffer harm."** This is talking about our closest friends. It says if we develop intimate friendships with the wise, we'll become wise. If we develop intimate friendships with fools, we'll suffer harm. This is an encouragement to walk with people who will influence us the right way. The way this influence takes place is brought out vividly in 27:17: **"Iron sharpens iron, So one man sharpens another."** Two people brought together in close friendship are like iron sharpening iron. Our personality and character rubs together and it's shaped by that contact. This can be a painful process; sparks can fly when iron sharpens iron; but the end result is that both parties are changed.

So we should choose our friends carefully because they'll inevitably have a huge impact on us. If you own your own a company and you want to hire a second in command to help you run the business, what kind of person do you hire? He will have access to your money, represent you and your company to the public, and help you make strategic decisions. Will you hire just anyone who walks in off the street? Of course not. You'll look for someone with character, wisdom, ability, and experience.

When it comes to choosing close friends, it's like you're hiring someone to be your right-hand man. This is a person whose advice you'll seek, who you'll turn to in times of trouble, who you'll share good times with, who you'll learn from, and who you'll teach. You don't approach the task of choosing friends lightly.

Many of us were taught we should be a friend to the friendless. That's not always good advice. If a person doesn't have friends, maybe there's a reason. Maybe other people have tried to be their friend and have paid for it. Maybe he's the kind of person who will talk about you behind your back, borrow money and never pay it back, break the stuff you let him use, and try to date your girlfriend (or your wife!). Maybe bringing this person into your life is an invitation for misery.

Several years ago there was an actor named Don Johnson who starred on a show called *Miami Vice*. When his career took off in the early seventies he got caught up in the Hollywood lifestyle and spent a decade taking drugs,

abusing alcohol, and "living it up." In 1983 he finally got his life straightened out and got sober. He was asked once if he had any regrets. He said, "Yes, I regret wasting lots of time with a bunch of jerks that I wish I hadn't spent 10 minutes with now, let alone ten years."

I'm not saying these people don't matter to God or that we shouldn't try to reach out to them and help them. We should befriend them and try to influence them, but we should be very careful about inviting this person into our inner circle. Show the love of Jesus to everyone, but be selective in who you share your heart with.

I've found this principle to be a helpful thing in making decisions. Whenever I've made an important decision one of the things I've tried to keep in mind is the kind of people I'll be exposing myself to. I know those people will have an impact on me. Thirty years ago I married Lynn partly because I was willing to have her change me. Twenty-five years ago I chose a seminary based on the fact that I wanted to end up thinking like many of its professors. Twenty-one years ago I chose to come to this church because I saw people in leadership here who I wanted to be like. They've all changed me. We're all partly who we are because of who we're friends with.

B. The scarcity of friends: But when it comes to choosing friends we're taught a second thing as well. Proverbs talks about the scarcity of friends. We're taught to choose one good friend over a host of casual friends. Look at 18:24: **"A man of many friends comes to ruin, But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."** The contrast is between those who have many superficial friends and those who have found one good friend. If a person of many friends comes to ruin, it stands to reason that a person of few friends will somehow prosper. And if there is one friend who sticks closer than even a brother, there are many friends who'll abandon us at some point along the way. In choosing friends, look for quality rather than quantity. We're often impressed by the person who seems to be friends with everybody. Everywhere they go people seem to know them. They get phone call after phone call from people who want to be with them. Their calendar is filled with social engagements while ours seems blank. But don't be fooled. One good friend is better than many superficial friends, and a rare commodity they are. If you have one, nurture it, protect it; it's worth the investment.

When it comes to choosing friends, look for quality, not quantity. But it's one thing to choose our friends; it's quite another to be a friend. What are the skills needed to be a friend? I've boiled these down to four skills that are crucial to being a friend.

II. BEING FRIENDS

A. Sensitivity: First, there is a need for sensitivity. We're talking here about being sensitive to what's appropriate or offensive. Proverbs says a lot about this. Look first at 25:17: **"Let your foot be rarely in your neighbor's house, Lest he become weary of you and hate you."** Here is a warning against wearing out your welcome. Don't be in your friend's house too much because sooner or later he'll get sick of you and loath the sound of your voice at the door. It doesn't say that we shouldn't ever be in our friend's house,

but don't overdo it. It helps to understand that culture. In that culture hosts were obligated to welcome and provide for guests, even if they resented it. It's the same thing in many countries today. In my travels in Eastern Europe I've learned I have to be careful about staying in homes with families. In those cultures they're expected to go overboard in extending hospitality even if they don't want to. Often it's very genuine, but since it's a cultural expectation you have to be careful not to take advantage because they would NEVER say anything. That's what this Proverb is talking about—being sensitive to those kinds of issues. Yes, we should show hospitality to one another, but that doesn't give us the right to take advantage.

Sensitivity is seen in other ways as well. Look at 26:18-19: **"Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows and death, So is the man who deceives his neighbor, And says, 'Was I not joking?'"** This is simply talking about someone who plays a joke at a friend's expense or is sarcastic and then when he gets upset says, "Can't you take a joke? Why are you so serious?" The person who does that is like a "madman" who throws dangerous weapons all over the place; he doesn't even know the damage he's doing! It's great to have a sense of humor, but never at a friend's expense. Regardless of how funny it was and how many people laughed, if they were hurt by it, you were wrong!

Sensitivity is also needed when a friend is hurting. Prov 25:20: **"Like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar on soda, Is he who sings songs to a troubled heart."** Two images are given and they both speak of actions which cause an immediate unpleasant reaction. One who takes a coat off on a cold day immediately reacts to the cold. And the acid in vinegar combined with the alkaline in soda immediately creates a bubbling reaction. When we sing songs to a troubled heart an unpleasant reaction takes place. When a person is hurting, the last thing they need is for someone to come along and try to get them to think positive or to look on the bright side. What they need is for someone to come along side of them and weep with them and be tender with them. George MacDonald writes, "Tears are often the only cure for weeping."

David Roper tells a story of a funeral he was conducting for a small child. As he waited for the family to gather, a little boy came up to the tiny casket and gazed in. He was obviously distressed and so, wanting to comfort him, David said to him, "Your little sister is with Jesus." As David later wrote, "Good theology. Bad timing." Immediately the boy burst into tears and said, "I don't want her to be with Jesus. I want her to be here so we can play." And then David put his arm around the boy and they both wept. That's what the boy needed.

So the first skill of friendship is sensitivity. There is a mistaken notion about friendship that says if you're really close with a person you needn't have any boundaries in the friendship. You can be free; let your hair down; don't worry about wearing out your welcome or poking a little fun. Some of that's true, but you can go too far. There is no friendship so close we should take it for granted.

B. Truth-telling: The second skill is truth-telling. Healthy friendships are based on truth, even if it hurts. Look at 27:5-6: **"Better is open rebuke than love that is**

concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy." These two Proverbs go together. Both speak of the need for truth-telling that's sometimes painful in a genuine friendship. An open rebuke is better than concealed love. Concealed love refuses to show itself by saying something that's needed but possibly hurtful, and that really isn't love at all. It's soft love; it's morally useless love; it's love that isn't tough enough to say something to a person when their behavior is destroying themselves and everyone around them. But "Faithful are the wounds of a friend." A friend who will tell you the truth, even when it might wound you, is precious. Their willingness to wound you is born out of faithfulness to you. It doesn't always feel that way. Nobody likes to be wounded. But, it's true.

This is an aspect of friendship that we have to be willing to both give and receive. If you have a friend in your life who cares for you and comes to you and tells you something about yourself that's hard for you to hear, then thank God for that person and take what they say seriously. We say we want to grow in our faith; we want God to direct us; this is often how God does it. He puts a friend in our path who loves us enough to reflect back to us some of the things about ourselves, some of the choices we're making, that are unwise. Sure, sometimes we have to consider the source, but more often we should consider the criticism, and if we hear it from more than one person, consider it even more. An old Yiddish proverb says, "If one man calls you an ass, pay him no mind. But if two men call you an ass, put on a saddle."

I can think of two occasions in the last year when women on our staff have come to me and very graciously but straightforwardly let me know that something I had said at a staff meeting was inappropriate and offensive. I know how hard that was for them but they were right and I thank God for their courage. I need friends like that in my life.

If you're the one doing the wounding, do it in the most loving way possible. Do it with an attitude of humility, examining your own life and owning the areas you fall short. If you can't receive a rebuke then you shouldn't be one giving one. This should never be easy. It should pain you as much as the one who hears it. Most of us fall into the extremes here. Either confrontation is too easy for us and we do it all the time or it's so difficult we refuse to do it at all. Neither extreme is right. It ought to be hard, but it needs to be done.

C. Loyalty: A third skill that's needed in friendship is loyalty. By the way, we're progressively moving to a deeper level, and as we do it doesn't get easier, it gets harder. Prov 17:17: **"A friend loves at all times, And a brother is born for adversity."** This is a very simple but profound verse. Both lines say essentially the same thing in a different way. A true friend is one who loves us at all times, in every circumstance of life. There is a hint here that the true colors of friendship are seen in the midst of adversity. When our lives are falling apart a true friend will stand with us. Or when our friend has failed, we'll be their to pick them up.

There is a great verse in the book of Job where he says, **"A despairing man should have the devotion of his friends, even though he forsakes the fear of the Almighty"**

(Job 6:14). Our friends will make mistakes. Our friends will have times they are despairing. At that time, more than any other time in their life, they need a loyal friend, the kind of friend who says, "Even if you go off the deep end and forsake God, I'm going to hang in there with you till you come to your senses."

We have many examples of this kind of loyalty in Scripture. I think of how Jonathan was a friend for David in a time of need. He went out of his way to help when David was in danger of being killed by King Saul, who happened to be Jonathan's father! I think also of Ruth who stuck with her mother-in-law, Naomi, after Naomi had lost everything. She followed her to a foreign land, saying, "Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge." I think of Barnabas who proved to be a friend to the apostle Paul after his conversion when the rest of the apostles were ready to turn him away. It's not easy to be a friend like that and it's not easy to find a friend like that. It means moving beyond friendship that's rooted in enjoyment or convenience to one that's rooted in the raw will to love. It requires tenacity to stay with someone when there isn't anything left in it for you. It requires a fourth skill needed for friendship.

D. Forgiveness: It's the most difficult skill of all. I'm talking about forgiveness. Ray Stedman used to say that there are three things that we must do for a friendship to last—forgive, forgive and forgive! Proverbs says the same thing. Look at 17:9: **"He who covers a transgression seeks love, But he who repeats a matter separates intimate friends."** Look also at 10:12: **"Hatred stirs up strife, But love covers all transgressions."** Both of these proverbs speak of forgiveness in an unusual way. They speak of "covering a transgression." That doesn't mean we ignore it; it means we see it and acknowledge it for what it is and by an act of our will we choose to forgive that person and not to make it public. We don't repeat it; we don't stir it up so that every angle of the scandal is exposed and every last drop of shame is drawn from the offender. A good friend will try to contain the damage of our sin. She will see all of our quirks and idiosyncrasies and be willing to stay with us and cover them. Thomas à Kempis wrote, "Be not angry that you can't make others as you want them to be, since you cannot make yourself as you wish to be."

Every close friendship progresses to a point where a decision has to be made. Will we cover the offensive actions and annoying traits of that person, and will the relationship then move to a deeper level, or will those things cause us to move away from our friend? Since we're all sinners every friendship will have to deal with the reality of sin, weakness, failure and conflict. Any friendship that hasn't had to deal with those things can't be considered close. Many people get to that point in the friendship and because they're unwilling to endure through the sin they bail out and move on to the next relationship. But, unless we're willing to love someone at their very worst we can't have the very best of friendship.

One of my favorite all time books is Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. The book disguises itself as a murder mystery but it's really about love and friendship and God. The main character in the book is a young man who has

murdered someone in cold blood but hasn't been caught. For months he's tortured by guilt and shame. In a very moving scene, he finally admits his crime to a young girl named Sonja. Sonja plays the Christ figure in the book and when she finds out about his crime she does an amazing thing. Instead of moving away from him, she weeps for him and then she vows to stay with him even when he's taken to prison. What hit me so hard in that scene was that he was so afraid that when she heard about his sin she would no longer love him. But what in fact happened was that it caused her to love him more. There was a sense in which she didn't just love in spite of his sin; she loved him more because of his sin. It was that forgiving love which eventually caused him to repent. That's the skill of forgiveness.

CONCLUSION

Let me close by asking you a question: How are you doing in the skill of friendship? It's not easy, is it? As a matter of fact, when we start talking about the kind of loyalty and forgiveness described here I would say it's virtually impossible in our own strength.

But all of this was meant to be a picture of the kind of love God has for us. Remember what Jesus said to his disciples, "No longer do I call you slaves, but I call you friends." Jesus has given to each one of us the promise of friendship. A friendship in which he displays every one of the skills we've talked about this morning—sensitivity, truth, loyalty, and forgiveness. The old hymn says,

*"I've found a friend, O such a friend,
He bled, he died, to save me.
And not alone the gift of life,
But his own self he gave me.
Naught that I have my own I call,
I hold it for the giver;
My heart, my strength, my life,
My all are his and his forever."*

And here lies the real key to being a friend. To be this kind of friend, we have to know the friendship of God in our hearts.

*"I've found a friend. O such a friend,
So kind and true and tender.
So wise a counselor and guide, so mighty a defender.
From him who loves me now so well,
What power my soul can sever?
Shall life or death or earth or hell?
No! I am his forever."*

Ultimately, Jesus is the friend who sticks closer than a brother. He loves us more not just in spite of our sin but because of our sin. Jesus is the friend who covers our transgressions. As we come to grips with that reality we can be that kind of friend to others.