

Intro

We're back into Proverbs this week, remembering that we're mining the wisdom for life set back on its right foundations – wisdom that begins with the fear of the Lord. Through the gospel, that wise life is life lived under the lordship of Jesus Christ...

Today we're mining Proverbs for wisdom about friendship.

The Importance of Friendship

When you think about the things that influence who we are and how we live, the people we choose to be friends with is a big factor.

Those of us who are parents will be concerned about the people our kids form friendships with.

But wisdom means we'll be discerning about who we form friendships with.

Remember we've been seeing in Proverbs the contrast between the wise and the foolish, or the righteous and the wicked.

Proverbs 12:26 says:

“A righteous man is cautious in friendship, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.” (Proverbs 12:26 NIV)

There are plenty of warnings about the kinds of people we should be cautious about having as friends.

In 16:28...

“A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends.” (Proverbs 16:28 NIV)

Some kinds of people actually destroy friendships rather than build them.

“Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared.” (Proverbs 22:24–25 NIV)

The people we're friends with can be influential in shaping the way we think, act and speak.

It's important who we choose to be friends with.

That doesn't mean that we won't have any kind of relationship with the kinds of people that Proverbs warns against forming friendships with.

But friendship is a deeper kind of relationship. Our friends can be a major influence on whether we live wisely or not.

So our friendships are important. The wise person values friendship highly enough to be cautious about who he or she makes friends with.

And on the flipside, we'll recognise how important it is for us to be good friends to others. Not like some of the kinds of friends we see in Proverbs... like the gossip who ruins friendships by talking behind someone's back.

Or like the person who overstays their welcome...

"Seldom set foot in your neighbour's house— too much of you, and he will hate you." (Proverbs 25:17 NIV)

Or the person who is insensitively cheerful at the wrong time...

"If a man loudly blesses his neighbour early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse." (Proverbs 27:14 NIV)

... perhaps meaning the kind of person who says "cheer up, it'll all be okay" when their friend can't see how it will be okay.

Wise people recognise the importance of having good friends, and being a good friend.

The Marks of Friendship

So friendship is important. But how would we define friendship? What do we look for in a relationship that marks us out as friends?

I have 462 Facebook friends. Some of you are my fb friends.

Over the past decade fb has re-defined the word 'friend'. We can be 'friends' with far more people than we could have a generation ago.

But are all my fb friends really ‘friends’? What are the marks of friendship?

“A man of many companions may come to ruin,” (Proverbs 18:24 NIV)

Apart from my 462 fb friends I know lots of other people too. But there’s not that many of them that I could really know well enough – or who could know me well enough – to be friends with...

Proverbs warns that a person may have many who call themselves friends but who are really only here for what we can offer them...

“The poor are shunned even by their neighbours, but the rich have many friends.” (Proverbs 14:20 NIV)

“Wealth brings many friends, but a poor man’s friend deserts him.” (Proverbs 19:4 NIV)

“Many curry favour with a ruler, and everyone is the friend of a man who gives gifts.” (Proverbs 19:6 NIV)

They’re what we would call ‘fair weather friends’ – people who like to be our friend while there’s something in it for them.

It need not be money or power either. It might just be popularity. We want to be friends with the cool people at school or uni, or even the influential people at work or at church.

But who’s going to be the friend of the popular minister when he messes up?... or of the pop star when he stops selling records?

“A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” (Proverbs 18:24-5 NIV)

Fair weather friends are plenty when things are going well, but the mark of true friendship is the person who is still there and even closer than a family member when things are not so good.

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

It’s usually only when life gets tough that we see who our true friends are.

Verse 25 is such a compliment because blood ties are the closest ties we have to anyone – but a true friend sticks closer than even a brother when times are hard.

Love

The mark of a true friend is genuine love.

We've become accustomed to making a distinction between 'love' relationships and friendships. We reserve the word 'love' for romantic relationships or family, but we tend to be more reserved about using the word 'love' when we're talking about friends.

But love is a mark of true friendship.

To love someone is to want what is best for them, regardless of what's in it for me.

I'm not out to discredit facebook here. Used rightly it can be a blessing and something that will enhance friendships.

But facebook encourages the kind of friendships that are all about me. It can be like being in conversation with someone who's talking about 'me me me me me me me' – that's enough about me... what about you, what do you think of me?'

That's the 'like' button... 'what do you think of me, friend?'

Our 'friends' are those that 'like' us.

And that encourages us in our sinfulness to create 'selves' that our 'friends' will like.

And that undermines the kind of loving relationship that friendship is.

Friends love their friends, whether they're wealthy, popular, whether they have an impressive fb profile, or even if they're not on fb at all. They love when our lives are rubbish and they come and get in the rubbish with us because they love us for who we really are.

Love is a mark of true friendship. It's not possible to have that kind of friendship with my 462 fb friends. But it is with those who I know well, and who know me well.

Friendships marked by genuine love are important to all of us – whether old or young, married or single, male or female. We are created as social beings for friendship.

As wise people, who recognise the importance of friendship, we should be looking for people to be a loving friend to, rather than just for people who will be friends with us.

Men need this kind of loving friendship with other men – to have other men in our lives who will stick closer than a brother, love us all the time – even when we're hard work.

The example of David and Jonathan in 1 and 2 Samuel is of a loving friendship between two men...

“And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself.” (1 Samuel 18:3 NIV)

My friend Jim, who's in ministry in Wollongong, has said to me when we've been talking on the phone 'see you mate, love you.'

And I have other close friends, both men and women, who will tell me the same thing. And I know they mean it, because their love shows up in their actions.

Wise people, love your friends! Find others to befriend and love them! Look around this congregation, and ask God to show you who you can be a friend to!

Faithfulness

The second mark of friendship is faithfulness.

“Many a man claims to have unfailing love, but a faithful man who can find?” (Proverbs 20:6 NIV)

A true friend is the one who will be there alongside you, backing you up, even if you've done something stupid. That doesn't mean they agree but they won't leave you.

I heard a powerful testimony of a wife last Thursday at a training session I was in, whose husband had been betraying her by viewing pornography. He told her about it, actually to hurt her enough so that she would leave him and he could get on with his addiction without restriction. She told him 'I will not leave you over this'.

What is that? That's faithfulness. Don't lose a friend like that.

And be a friend like that.

"Do not forsake your friend and the friend of your father," (Proverbs 27:10 NIV)

Don't neglect the friend who has stood by you when you're surrounded by the friends who want to be with you. How hurtful is it to realise that your friends aren't really your friends, when the phone calls and the invitations start to dry up?

"A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." (Proverbs 18:24-5 NIV)

Be that kind of friend, and hang on to that kind of friend.

Frankness

The other mark of friendship we'll look at today is frankness, i.e. the willingness to love a friend enough to call them or challenge them where they need us to.

Elvis Presley was 42 when he died. His place in music history, his voice, his talent, his popularity... he had everything going for him. And he had companions by the bucket-load.

Everybody wanted to be Elvis's friend. But out of all his 'friends' there were few who loved him enough to call him on the lifestyle that eventually led to his early death. They just went along with whatever he wanted to do because they didn't want to do anything that might cause him to 'un-friend' them.

"Better is open rebuke than hidden love" (Proverbs 27:5 NIV)

"Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses." (Proverbs 27:6 NIV)

I can trust a word of rebuke given to me by a friend because I know it's for my good... because I'm a sinful man and I can't always see my own foolishness.

If you see me heading down a path that's wrong or doing something stupid and don't call me on it because you think it might risk our friendship, then you're not being a true friend. Our friendship has become more about meeting your needs than what's best for your friend.

If Elvis had been called on his drug taking, his ridiculous diet and lifestyle by a true friend, instead of just being smothered with the kisses of enemies wanting to be called his friends, he might still be alive.

“Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of one's friend springs from his earnest counsel.” (Proverbs 27:9 NIV)

... that's the counsel, or well-thought out, loving words of a true friend is like sweet-smelling perfume.

But it's a two way street...

“As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” (Proverbs 27:17 NIV)

Friends help each other to see the things in our lives that we don't see ourselves, and love us enough to risk our friendship by helping us – lovingly – to see what we don't see. And they stand by us while we change.

The Model of Friendship

We've seen the importance of friendship for all people, and we've looked at some important marks of true friendship – love, faithfulness and frankness.

Finally, what's our model of friendship? Where do we see these marks of friendship and the importance of friendship displayed perfectly?

We see it in Jesus Christ.

Jesus came to frankly call us on our sin – not to leave us in it, facing its eternal consequences. The gospel is a word that wounds, as it confronts our sin and calls us to leave it. Jesus’ words aim to wound so that he can heal us by reconciling us to friendship with God.

Jesus is the unfailingly faithful friend of sinners. He is the friend who stands by us even though we continue to fail him. Even the best human friends will at times let each other down. Jesus never will. He is the friend who sticks closer than a brother... who will never forsake his friends when a better offer comes along.

Jesus is the friend who genuinely loves his friends for their good, and not for what’s in it for him. That’s the love he displayed on the cross when he stepped in for us and paid for our sins.

“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13 NIV)

Jesus did that, not for people who were being a friend to him, but for us who were his enemies. He did it so that we can be friends with him.

And he turns no one away who accepts his offer of friendship.

By grace, we are friends of the greatest friend we can imagine. His loving, faithful, frank friendship is the model for our friendships.

Let’s spend a few moments thinking about our friendships... or about the people who might need our friendship... and quietly pray – give thanks to God for your friendships – and pray for his help to be a friend like Jesus.