

Part 37: How To Be a Friend

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I read a humorous story in a book by the historian Jon Meacham. He recounted an encounter between two men, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Winston Churchill: one the president of the United States of America, the other the Prime Minister of Great Britain.

It was 1941, and the two countries were nearing what would be the midway point in World War II. Churchill was in Washington D.C. for a diplomatic trip over Christmastime and Roosevelt knocked on the Prime Ministers door one winter morning and was invited in by a warm cheery voice. Roosevelt opened the door only to find Churchill pacing about without clothes fresh out of the bath. A surprised Roosevelt tried to reverently retreat but was stopped he heard the famous British diplomat chuckle back and say, "You see Mr. President, I've got nothing to hide from you."

In a world where diplomatic relationships were riddled with strife, duplicity and insincerity, Meacham shows the unique, intimate friendship shared between these two men. A friendship, which he argued, endured the two through one of the world's darkest seasons.

Both of their families have reflected upon the ways in which this true and honest friendship buoyed the two men with great resolve in a season of deep personal stress and anxiety. As the world literally waged war around them, it was in the confines of this relationship that Churchill wrote to Roosevelt saying, "Our friendship is the rock on which I build for the future of the world so long as I am one of the builders."

Amidst darkness, trauma, loss and heartache a friendship shaped not just the world, but the lives of two great men. In reflecting on friendship in his book *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis says the center of such relationships is the question "Do you see the same truth," or as he put it another way, "Do you care about the same truth?"

For FDR and Winston Churchill that truth was a belief that freedom trumped tyranny and evil needed to be resisted. But for us, today, for our friends, our families and our neighbors what is the truth shared in our own darkest nights?

Our world clamors for stories of friendship, but what is the truth and care which takes casual relationships and equips them to endure when life is hard? The book of Proverbs wants us to prepare for these dark years by pointing us to trust in the Lord. That has been a huge point throughout our study. We must learn to lean not on our own understanding, but to acknowledge the sovereign care of Jesus Christ.

But inside of God's sovereign relief for us is the gift of gospel-centered friendships--friendships shaped by the shared truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is going to be what we are going to examine today and we are going to see this in two parts. First in Proverbs 27:5-7 we are going to look at **How to Be Friendled**. That is how we can prepare ourselves for friends who help us endure and pull us into a sweet relationship of love and care. It prepares us to encounter a good friend. But secondly we are going to see in verses 8-10, **How to Befriend**--that is how can we act as friends towards others, how can we as a

church, brothers, sisters, and members create a community which protects and displays the care and the counsel of true friendship.

This is why God's wisdom is so good for us. Even in friendship God wishes us to encounter the beauty of Jesus Christ. He cares not only who our friends are, but he desires that our friendships be rich and rewarding, sweet and satisfying. But he knows that we are prone to define for ourselves what such rewarding friendships look like. Instead today, Solomon would have us submit our idea of friendship to the God who cares more about us and our friends than we ever could. A God who sent his own son to be a friend of sinners.

This is our first point this morning: **How to Be Friendled.** For many of us, entering a friendship these days is as simple as clicking "accept." But to actually be the recipient of good friendship is a skill that Solomon wants us to be equipped for.

We spend a lot of time in pre-marriage with young couples equipping them for the challenges which accompany the unique intimacy of marriage. But we often gloss over the same challenges and encouragements the Bible provides friends. This is part of the reason why singles often feel discontent or like second-class citizens in the church.

But here, for all intents and purposes, is a pre-friendship class for all who desire deep and intimate relationships.

Read with me **Proverbs 27:5-7.**

In this passage we see why we need to humble ourselves and listen to God's word. What we have just encountered is a paradox of friendship.

If I were to ask you which you would prefer in friendship, which would you choose? Rebuke or love? Wounds or Kisses? Honey or Bitterness?

I'm sure most of us would take sweet, loving kisses. But the paradox of Proverbs is that appearances aren't always what they seem. Solomon wants us to take our cultural ideas of friendship and hold it up to the light of God's word so that we might see the reality inside of our relationships.

Here we see that a friend who is willing to rebuke you in an observable way is far better than a friend who loves you in a manner you can never actually see. While we might think that profuse and endless affirmations stem from a pure heart, often times those flattering words are meant to disguise an enemy whereas the wounds of a true friend are faithful, they are meant not to betray, but to bond.

How faithful? The same word here is the same word David uses in Psalm 19 to say the testimony of God's word is sure and faithful—never failing.

But if we want a friend who is faithful like God is faithful, that is true meaningful friendship, we must realize the posture of humility this requires. We must be humble enough to see ourselves as God sees us, and how others often see us. We are often in need of rebuke, correction and adjustment.

Why? Because we are not God. If we were God this kind of instruction would be so out of place. If we were totally perfect, infallible in our ways, all knowing in our intellect then this kind of relationship

would be so out of place. But friendship grows out of a shared truth, a truth that we need each other to know ourselves.

Friendship which sees each other as God sees us is what we need! You want to know the true test of friendship? It's who will tell you there is something nasty in your teeth. We've all been places with acquaintances, business partners or neighbors where we see that kale salad wedged right up in there. But it's often only those with whom we are really comfortable that we say: "You've got something in your teeth."

Now without that kind of relationship, we'd let that person go on thinking that they are totally fine. But a true friend, a good friend, points out what we can't see and the recipient realizes that as embarrassing as the realization might be, they are better off because of it.

Are you prepared for a friend who comments not on the state of your teeth, but the state of your soul?

We live in a world driven by what is called expressive individualism. That is the idea that the only person who knows best, who best understands you, and who knows what is good for you, is exclusively yourself.

But not only does this idea present a wrongheaded arrogance about our own perception of ourselves and our reality, effectively establishing one's self as their own sovereign god, but it actually limits our joy in relationships. The times when I feel most friended by my wife are the times where she shows that she knows me better than I know myself.

She provides for me a word, or a gesture which I would have never thought to be fitting but which provided for me exactly what I needed. To think that your own heart is the expert and sole counselor for your life is to find yourself in a lonely place.

What happens in this culture, and what needs to be prepared for if we want to apply this text, is when we encounter people who speak up in a way that feels like a critique of us, which wounds us unexpectedly, we cut them out of our lives.

We label them as toxic, unsupportive, and unloving. But have you thought about what the opposite side of this coin is. If we only cultivate friends who cover us in self-affirming kisses, but who are never actually allowed to disagree with us, have we really loved another? Are we actually friends with that person? Or do we enjoy and accept that person only so far as they agree with us and affirm us.

Many of us think that we desperately desire meaningful friendship, but what we really want are fans. Fans are rich with profuse kisses, but fans don't fill stadiums when you have a losing record. Fans don't provide coaching tips which are actually helpful. Fans jump to the newest celebrity as soon as you lose your luster and you become difficult to befriend.

But here, we learn to truly love another by treating and empowering their voice as a friend and not stealing their praise as empty fans.

Now there are oppressive and unsupportive people and we will talk about those in a little bit. But Solomon here wants to prepare you for true friendship by telling you that what seems bitter, might

actually be sweet. What seems hard to hear, might actually be the most visible love. What seems to hurt might actually be a sign of the nearness of the truest friends.

Charles Bridges commented on his own need for this when he said: **What is the friend, who will be a real blessing to my soul? Is it one, that will humor my fancies, and flatter my vanity?...This comes far short of my requirement. I am a poor, straying sinner, with a wayward will and a blinded heart; going wrong at every step. The friend for my case is one, who will watch over me with open rebuke (not always public, but with a free and open heart); a reprovener when needful—not a flatterer. The genuineness of friendship without this mark is more than doubtful; its usefulness utterly paralyzed.**

One thing I often say to couples who are dating is to look at the biblical postures God presents of husbands and wives. Husbands are called to be a head of their wife as Christ is the head of the church. Wives are called to help, to motivate, and to partner with their husbands in the pursuit of God's glory as Eve did with Adam. They are, like Zipporah to Moses, called to take action and do what is right and good in the Lord's eyes even when their husband is blind and bumbling.

So I always say to people, don't trust a man who you wouldn't trust as a head. You have that choice. Don't covenant yourself to a lady who you don't trust to help you love Jesus more. You have that choice.

But here, those same principles apply to friendship universally. Just as there are roles in marriage, here are roles in friendship. Don't trust a friend to rebuke you and to wound you, who doesn't rebuke and wound with a clear understanding of sin and the gospel. You have that choice.

The context of Solomon's words on friendship is to the people of Israel who are bound together by loyalty to the God who saved them, protected them and loved them. It's this shared idea of God's good for his people that births true lasting friendship.

We will never be prepared for this without humility. But as verse 27 says, if we realize our limitations, then even what seems to be bitter will eventually be sweet for us.

I've experienced this before. I had a season of life where my humor was often coarse and crude. One friend wrote me an email stressing the foolishness of my words and the witness it presented on Jesus' church. I looked back at that as a formative moment in gospel-centered friendship, but I also remember how much it hurt. I actually found the email this week and re-read it and it made me queasy. It was so pointed, and yet in remembering it I remembered not primarily the barb, but the blessing.

One thing we need to be prepared for in these metaphors Solomon gives is the ability to not recoil when words meet reality--when we feel rebuked, wounded and bitter.

But for those who share a truth in the gospel, we must for the sake of friendship lean into these moments. Paul himself did this with the church in Corinth, they felt the sting, it disrupted what was comfortable in that relationship but look at what Paul said about his motives: **2 Corinthians 2:3-4.**

Do you remember what we read **Proverbs 24:10-11**? If we want to be friends, we need to prepare for others to reach out to us when we don't realize the danger we are in. But also we need to be willing to do the hard work of reaching out.

J.R.R Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams were a group of three intimate friends. This unique friendship circle is partly what undergirded Tolkien's theme of friendship in the Lord of the Rings trilogy. Consider Tolkien's understanding of Proverbs when we read of Sam's words to Frodo in the Fellowship of the Ring: **"You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin – to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours – closer than you yourself keep it. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone, and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo."**

If you desire good friends, better friends, faithful friends, desire friends who are willing to bear one another's burdens with you and so fulfill the law of Christ.

This is where Solomon pivots a bit from focusing on how we receive friendship to the community of friendship. He moves from the paradox of these relationships to the proximity of them. Read with me **Proverbs 27:8-10**.

So here we see our second point this morning: **How to Befriend**.

It is true that there are two ditches on both sides of our text today. One ditch is that of the expressive individualism we already talked about. This is the ditch that refuse to allow anyone near them who will not always and only affirm them. But there is another ditch which is just as dangerous and that is the ditch that is always critical, always rebuking, and never actually loving.

Sometimes we as Christians can be so fixated on the truth that we think we can wield it like a battering ram against whomever we will with no adverse consequence. But what we see in these verses is the nature of a community where truth is coupled with grace. Where correction comes from a friend or a neighbor as it would from our own family.

He assumes that when calamity strikes, when things are hard, when perhaps even rebuke is heavy we would long for our family. Why? Because there are few places where one can simultaneously be rebuked and wounded and yet feel as loved as they do in the family.

That's why Solomon uses the illustration of bird leaving the nest. The nest is where the bird is the safest and most cared for, to walk away from the family is to walk away from the place of care and security.

No one can quite speak into my life like my wife because I know my wife loves me. She is my family. No one disciplines my son more than I do, no one wounds him in this sense more than me, but my hope is that my son knows more than anything how much I love him. That when it comes to his friends, or his teachers, he is assured that dad loves him more.

But where family is distant Solomon says, do not forsake your friends and the friends of your father. What a stunning comparison. Solomon means to say that when life is hard, when family is far away you should not need to spend so much time, money and energy to get home in order to receive care. But instead you should be part of a community of friends who love you and care for you with the same tension of truth and grace as your very family.

Look at **Proverbs 17:17**. Do you see what happens there? Solomon is tying the faithful love of a friend to the love of a brother. Just as in the midst of adversity your blood family is there to love you and care for you, so too should gospel-centered friendship be able to care for you.

Today we have all of our kids with us, and how I long for my children to know the joy of Proverbs 27:10. That in the day of hardship they do not need to forsake the friends of their father and their mother.

In the church, we ought to care for the children of our friends in the same way their parents do. Gospel-friendship means that we see the kids of our friends as our own kids. To those without children here, do you aspire to love and support the kids of your fellow church members in this way?

We historically have always had a need for people to volunteer for our kid's ministry, I pray that we would have too many people who want to love the kids of their friends like this. I know one of our elders who purchased his son a phone and pre-loaded all of his fellow elders into the phone for his child. Why? Because he wanted his kid to know that these men wanted to care for him and love him. When times were hard, when he needed something all he had to do was call and we would be there.

Kids who are in here today, look at who your parents are talking to after church. When you are wrestling with things you're even too scared to bring to your parents, bring it to your parent's friends. We want to, in fact the gospel commands us, to love you as extensions of your parents.

But when such reaching out is to happen from either a child or a peer, how are we to respond? We fight for gospel shaped friendship with a gospel shaped heart. Look back again at **Proverbs 27:9**.

Depending upon your translations it might read a bit differently. But the Hebrew of this text reads almost literally: the sweetness of a friend comes from *his nephesh*. That Hebrew word *nephesh* is the word for soul. It's the innermost part of the person.

What makes for sweet friendship, friendship which soothes like sweet oil is the heart of the friend? A heart which openly and eagerly wants to counsel and care for others with the same care they themselves have from Jesus.

Gospel-centered friendship is not harming people with correction and saying: Get over it. Gospel-centered friendship humbly moves towards others with grace and truth like Jesus did for us. Consider how we met Jesus in **John 1:14-17**.

Jesus came to reveal sin like light in the midst of darkness. But he did so with grace and truth. Jesus made sin feel dangerous and repentant sinners feel safe. The law of Moses came to reveal our weaknesses. Jesus came to reveal our weaknesses, but to also reveal relief, the promise of forgiveness and the hope of real true change.

So I want to give a couple practical points here when it comes to earnest counsel from the heart.

First, ***be willing to speak from and to the heart***. Much of our friendships revolve around cultural things: who we hunt with, who we go to school with, who we share interests and hobbies with. But to pick up on Lewis' idea and Solomon's words here, what lies at the center of Christian friendship is a heart changed by Jesus.

With your football friends you easily get to the topic of football. With your mom friends you easily get to the topic of parenting. With your Christian friends do you easily get to the topic of your heart?

I want to talk briefly to those of us in here who wrestle with friendship. There are some of us, myself often included, who really wrestle to have friends who care for us like this. But if we do not understand the joys of true friendship we leave on the table a tangible experience of how Jesus loves us. You need friends like this. You don't need a thousand. But you need some. Start these conversations even today after church by asking your friends, or some new friend, heart level questions.

Second, ***assume the best even when we expect the worst.*** When Paul gives a stunning portrait of love in 1 Corinthians he says love bears all things, believes all things, and hopes all things. When we begin to speak into the life of another brother or sister in Christ, hope all things. In other words we don't have to go in thinking they are the world's hardest hearted sinner and we also don't need to assume that they will respond with anger to our words. We can hope that they were just blind to their sin, we can hope that they will respond with the reasonableness of the Holy Spirit.

It might be that their sin and their response is more difficult than we thought. But when we assume the worst in those situations, we often are slow to love, to encourage and to provide hope. Instead expect the gospel to do gospel things in our relationships and we will find it less intimidating to speak up, and less offensive when we are spoken to.

And lastly, ***lead your friends to Jesus.*** Look at **Proverbs 27:10b** and now look at **Proverbs 18:24**.

To create a culture of gospel-friendship we must first be a culture shaped by the gospel. The goal of gospel centered friendship is to hold our friends up not to ourselves, but to Jesus who sticks to sinners closer than a brother. Even as we try and create a culture of gospel-centered friendships we will fail, we will harm people by speaking too harshly, and we will harm people by practicing selfish and hidden love. But Jesus is the perfect and faithful friend. By his wounds we are not only corrected, but we are healed.

We often reserve Jesus-centered, intimate relationships to parenting and marriage. But here the gift of gospel-centered friendship provides all of us an intimacy which selflessly serves and loves others when life is hard.