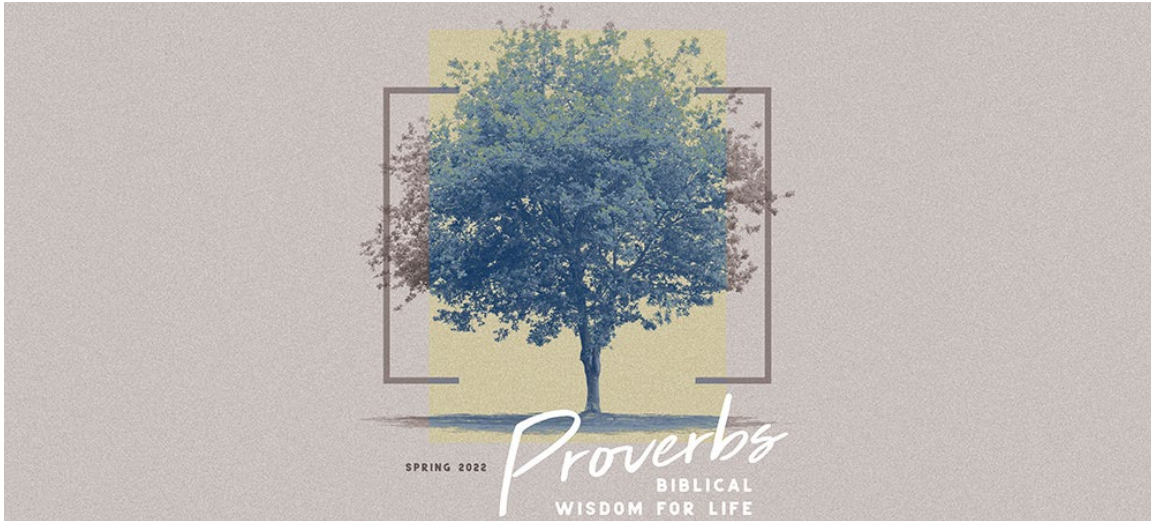


Week 20: Proverbs: Wisdom in Friendships

Hook



Main Point: True godly friends are a treasure because they bring you closer to God.

What is your favorite television friendship? Teacher, ask your LifeGroup to name the best friend in the following series:

The Mary Tyler Moore Show: Mary and ? (Rhoda)

Scooby Doo: Scooby and ? (Shaggy)

I Love Lucy: Lucy and ? (Ethel)

Sherlock: Sherlock and ? (Watson)

The Andy Griffith Show: Andy and ? (Barney)

Q: In what ways were these friendships good?

Q: In what ways were they unhealthy?

Q: How can a godly friend help you grow in your faith?

Q: Who are some of your most treasured friends? How have they impacted your walk with Christ?

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Book

Main Point: True godly friends are a treasure because they bring you closer to God.

Proverbs 12:26; 13:20; 15:18; 16:28; 22:24–25; 25:19; and 26:21 [Read]

Talking Point 1: The wrong friends can lead you astray.

Q: How have your choices in friends impacted your life?

Q: Why do the wicked like to stir up trouble between other people?

There are many modern-day proverbs about friendships, such as “you’re known by the company you keep,” “a friend in need is a friend indeed,” or even “keep your friends close and your enemies closer.” The Bible is also full of proverbs about friendships because your friendships can really affect your life. We’ve all seen how easy it is to get sucked into the “wrong crowd” and end up doing things we know we shouldn’t because our friends are doing it. On the other hand, having a good friend who encourages and challenges you to do what is right can be a huge support in your walk with the Lord.

Just as Proverbs contrasts wisdom and folly and the wicked and the righteous, it also contrasts good friendships with bad ones. Proverbs 12:26 and 13:20 both use antithetic parallelism to contrast between good and bad friends. These two proverbs say almost the same thing but in different ways. A righteous friend will guide his friends in the right direction, but a wicked friend will lead them astray (12:26, NIV). If you walk with the wise, you will become wise, but if you hang out with fools, you’ll suffer harm because you’ll make foolish choices, too (13:20).

Proverbs 22:24–25 vividly describes the dangers of friendship with wicked – we will get entangled in a snare, like an animal caught in a trap, so entangled they can’t get out. Extreme examples might come to your mind, such as people who fell into a criminal lifestyle due to the influence of friends and could not break free of sinful behaviors. But the principle extends to more mundane behaviors; it can happen with friends who gossip a lot (16:28), people who are given to anger (22:24), and those who are quarrelsome (26:21), or deceitful (25:19), among other things. These people are like hot embers that can start a fire (26:21), a bad tooth or a foot that slips (25:19). They can cause us a lot of pain.

Proverbs is telling us that the wise are careful to avoid dangerous friendships. A more literal translation of the first line of Proverbs 12:26 is “the righteous chooses his friends

carefully” (in the ESV footnotes as an alternative translation). The verb there is “to seek” or “to spy” such as when the 12 spies went into the promised land. This gives us the image of people who take time to “check people out” before they become close friends to make sure they’re someone they want to be aligned with or connected to.¹ Of course, you can be casual friends with anyone and everyone, “wicked” or “righteous.” A Christian should be friends with someone Proverbs would consider wicked (someone who doesn’t follow God or His wisdom) because if no Christians ever did, how would that person ever hear about Jesus (Romans 10:14)? These verses are talking about becoming close friends with this person, throwing your lot in with them.

The Hebrew word for friend can be translated “companion,” not just a casual friend but someone you intentionally align yourself with as a companion, kind of like a partner. In an honor/shame culture, friendships were not entered into lightly. They were an important way to make connections and gain honor and status in society. In the ancient world, close friendships could even be formally sealed with a covenant, just like a business or a marriage covenant.²

The greatest example in the Old Testament is the covenant between Jonathan and David (1 Samuel 18). Scripture describes their relationship so beautifully, saying “The soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” (18:1). This imagery describes what a covenant friendship was – their lives were interwoven, interconnected. They could not be pulled apart; a friendship covenant was unbreakable. It was a “life union” of “a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24). Like yarn woven together, their covenant created something new and stronger than either was on his own. Their friendship covenant was so strong that Jonathan went behind his father’s back to help David escape Saul. Their bond was thicker than blood.³

In an honor/shame culture, even without an official friendship covenant, people chose their friends carefully because those connections would either raise or lower their honor level.⁴ Though ours isn’t an honor/shame culture, we have similar situations surrounding friendships, like considering how a friend choice might impact our social standing. But Proverbs is telling us to base our friendships not on who could boost our honor in the world’s eyes but on who would be a better influence on us in following God. We should choose our friends based on who is righteous and wise, not who is cool or popular or powerful. Proverbs agrees with the world that who we align ourselves with is monumentally important to how our lives will turn out, but the criteria for what makes a good connection versus a bad one is completely different.

Q: What advice have you given to your children or people you have mentored about choosing friends?

Q: Describe a time when you were “led astray” by friends.

Q: How can you keep yourself from being led astray by those you are witnessing to?

Proverbs 17:17; 27:4–10, 17; and 28:23 [Read]

Talking Point 2: True godly friends make each other stronger.

Q: Why is a friend who tells you the hard truth better than a friend who flatters you?

Q: What does it mean to “sharpen each other” as friends?

Proverbs teaches us that a true friend is someone who is there with you and for you through the hard times and isn’t just a fair-weather friend (17:17). This friend confronts you with love and grace when there is a conflict rather than gossiping behind your back (27:5). He or she encourages you but holds you accountable when you need it (28:23) and “stir [you] up ... to love and good works” (Hebrews 10:24). Most importantly, true friends know the Lord and help you grow in His wisdom.

Wise friends speak the truth even when it’s hard. Instead of telling you how great you are all the time (28:23), they confront you directly (27:5). Wise friends don’t crave sweet talk (27:6–7); they would rather be “hurt” by open rebuke so they can fix what’s wrong. “Iron sharpens iron” (27:17) is one of the most often quoted proverbs in the Bible, but have we really thought about iron banging against iron? This is not a painless process; it hurts! But as we learned in an earlier lesson, a wise friend welcomes rebuke from a godly friend. He or she knows this is real love because the friend is trying to help improve him or her. This is “earnest counsel” (27:9). A wise person doesn’t surround himself or herself with “yes men” or flatterers but with friends who offer wise counsel that helps him or her to grow in faith.

Godly friendships are not one-way streets. We have to sharpen *each other* (27:17). Scripture doesn’t say “clay sharpens iron”; both people have to be “iron.” To sharpen each other, both have to be strong. Of course, you can *mentor* a newer Christian who is not as strong as you to help that person grow, and you can befriend an unbeliever to lead him or her to Christ. But in your closest mutual friendships, you need to surround yourself with friends who are like iron, relationships in which you are willing to admonish and rebuke one another in love so you both will become more like Christ. This

is how the body of Christ works best—sharpening one another, being willing to speak truth to one another even when it's hard, and even harder, being willing to receive that hard truth with humility when it is given. This is a wonderful way to grow in God's wisdom.

Q: Describe a time when a friend shared a hard truth with you. How did you respond?

Q: How have you experienced reciprocal relationships in which you sharpened each other?

Q: What kind of attitude is necessary to have a relationship of accountability?

Q: What ministries within Prestonwood have helped you develop “iron sharpens iron” types of friendships?

Proverbs 17:17; 18:24; and 27:10 [Read]

Talking Point 3: True godly friends are closer than family.

Q: Give some specific examples of how a godly friend can be closer than family.

Proverbs describes “a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (18:24). We saw how that was true in David and Jonathan's lives, and many of us have experienced this with our friends. How many of us have close friends who are more like family than our actual brothers, sisters or cousins? How many of us have a mentor who is more like a father or mother than our actual parents? Proverbs tells us that a friend who is near is better than a brother who is far away (27:10). This could mean physically near, but it can also mean emotionally or spiritually close. The bonds we have with our brothers and sisters in Christ through the Holy Spirit can be closer than a biological bond.

Godly friends aren't just friends, they are family. The Bible says when you become a Christian, you enter God's family as an adopted child, a co-heir with Christ. Which means you also inherit millions of brothers and sisters all over the world and even throughout history. Of course, you won't have personal relationships with all of them, even if they are family. You won't even meet most of them in your lifetime. But those in your local church community should function like a family, caring for one another's needs and burdens.

In Christ, you have a bond with these people that is greater than even your bond with your biological family. You have the same purpose, the same values, ethics and beliefs,

and the same mission to build God's kingdom. Most importantly, you all have the same Holy Spirit dwelling inside you, growing His fruit in you, molding you into the image of Jesus. The Spirit creates unity that can bond together in love even the most opposite people in the world (Ephesians 4:1–6). When the Spirit binds us, we can have a completely different friendship than anything the world could ever offer.

Q: In what ways are your Christian friendships closer than your biological family relationships? How do you depend on one another and function as a “family”?

Q: How can we do better at being family for each other in our church?

Week 20: Proverbs: Wisdom in Friendships

Took

Main Point: True godly friends are a treasure because they bring you closer to God.

Have a leader share about a biblical friendship from his or her life and how that friendship helped him or her to grow. Challenge the members in your LifeGroup to think of acquaintances who have the potential to make good Christian friends, and encourage them to intentionally lean into those connections to form stronger biblical friendships.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Which friendships might you need to distance yourself from? Are there people who are leading you astray? Which friends are like iron for you?

PRAY: For God to reveal to you any friendships you need to back away from and guide you to friends who can sharpen you. Ask Him to reveal the things in you that need to change to make you a better friend to others. Pray for God to bring at least one really good godly friend into your life who can be an accountability partner for you.

ACT: Meet with an accountability partner this week. If you already have one, great! If you don't, pray about whom to choose. Consult your LifeGroup leaders or divisional minister if you would like suggestions or a roadmap as to how the relationship should work.

¹ J. A. Emerton, "A Note in Proverbs 12:26" *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 76 (1964).

² John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

³ W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites: The Fundamental Institutions*, 2nd edition (London, UK: Routledge, 1894).

⁴ E. Randolph Richards and Richard James, *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes: Patronage, Honor, and Shame in the Biblical World* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2020).