

Friendship

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[0 : 0 0] Good. Well, time now for our Bible reading. Paul Brennan is preaching to us again this morning and he's continuing his series of sermons from the book of Proverbs. And our reading today is Proverbs chapter 12, the whole chapter. So do turn to that if you can get sight of a Bible just after the Psalms in the middle of the Bible. So Proverbs chapter 12, beginning at verse one. Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid. A good man obtains favor from the Lord, but a man of evil devices he condemns. No one is established by wickedness, but the root of the righteous will never be moved. An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rotteness in his bones. The thoughts of the righteous are just. The counsels of the wicked are deceitful.

The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood, but the mouth of the upright delivers them. The wicked are overthrown and are no more, but the house of the righteous will stand.

A man is commended according to his good sense, but one of twisted mind is despised. Better to be lowly and have a servant than to play the great man and lack bread.

Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel. Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense.

Whoever is wicked covets the spoil of evildoers, but the root of the righteous bears fruit. An evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips, but the righteous escapes from trouble.

[2 : 2 5] From the fruit of his mouth, a man is satisfied with good, and the work of a man's hand comes back to him. The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.

The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent ignores an insult. Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness utters deceit.

There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment.

Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, but those who plan peace have joy. No ill befalls the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble.

Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight. A prudent man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools proclaims folly.

[3 : 4 1] The hand of the diligent will rule, while the slothful will be put to forced labor. Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad.

One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor, but the way of the wicked leads them astray. Whoever is slothful will not roast his game, but the diligent man will get precious wealth.

In the path of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death. Well, praise be to God for his word.

We look forward to hearing more from it. Well, good morning, and it would be a help to have the book of Proverbs open in front of you, and perhaps that chapter that Edward read for us earlier, chapter 12.

We will be spending a bit of time in that chapter, but we'll be, as of last week, dotting around Proverbs and soaking up the wisdom that Proverbs has for us on the topic of friendship.

[4 : 55] So that's our topic this morning, the topic of friendship. Now, the Bishop of Liverpool in the 19th century, J.C. Ryle, wrote these words on friendship.

He said, This world is full of sorrow because it is full of sin. It is a dark place. It is a lonely place. It is a disappointing place.

The brightest sunbeam in it is a friend. Friendship halves our troubles and doubles our joys. Isn't that lovely? Friendship halves our troubles and doubles our joys.

Now, I've come across many articles in recent months about a so-called friendship crisis. In fact, one recent study in the U.S. came to the conclusion that there is a male friendship recession in particular.

Men are losing friends quickly. It reports that the percentage of men with at least six good friends has fallen by half since 1990. Almost a quarter of American men have fewer than six close friends.

[6 : 12] Those with none is about 15%. Now, that's America. And the trends observed in American society are likely to be similar here, I would think.

And what is true of our wider society is likely to be true in the church as well. We are not immune to the trends out there in the world around us. And when it comes to friends and friendship, we need to be aware that this is an area that needs attention.

We need friendship. It's vital. But we must be wise as we seek friendship because friendship, as we'll see, is a powerful thing.

Our relationships, our friendships, they are the greatest sources of joy in this life. And, of course, can be the greatest source of sorrow as well. Friendship can pull us up towards righteousness or drag us down into folly.

Just consider the very sorry tale in recent years of Prince Andrew and the fallout from his friendship with Mr. Epstein. It dragged him into major trouble, clouded his judgment, cost him his job, led to a very public fall from grace.

[7 : 33] That was a friendship that led him somewhere he thought he never would go. Friendships are very powerful for good or for ill. Friendships have huge implications, not just on how life will go for us here, but they can have eternal implications too.

They can impact our relationship with the Lord himself. Our relationships here with each other, relationships on the horizontal level, they do impact and shape our relationship with the Lord on the vertical level.

They impact our righteousness, our relationship with the Lord. And that is why Proverbs has so much to say about friendships and about relationships.

As you read through, if you try and mark, underline every verse in Proverbs, that has some bearing on how we relate with one another, that's full of it. It's everywhere.

The Scottish pastor Hugh Black from the 19th century said, regarding Proverbs, there is no book, even in classical literature, which so exalts the idea of friendship and is so anxious to have it truly valued and carefully kept.

[8 : 52] Proverbs is full of relational wisdom because it's a book that comes to us from the lips of the creator, covenant Lord. He is a relational God and he's speaking to relational people, people like you and me and every other person on this planet.

This is his wisdom and it sets out the realities of how life works in the world that he's made, the world that lives under his sovereignty.

And so we would do well to listen to it, to submit to it, especially in the area of friendships and relationships. Wisdom is profoundly relational.

It's not just a set of ideas over there. It's about life and relationships and friendship. Now there's a lot to say. As I said, if you were to comb through Proverbs and underline every significant verse about friendship, we'd be here for a while.

So we're going to focus it in a bit. And we're going to focus on two key things about friendships. The first is seeking friendship and the second is offering friendship.

[9 : 58] How to find friends and how to be a friend. So first, we're going to think about seeking friendship. How to find friends. And here's the key point.

Given that friendships are so powerful, choose your friends with great care. Look again at the verse that we read earlier from chapter 12 and verse 26.

In our ESV, it reads like this. One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.

A slightly better translation, as Bruce Waltke has it, on verse 26, would be a righteous man searches out his confidential friend.

Or as our footnote has it, if you've got your footnote there on the ESV for that verse, it says, the righteous chooses his friends carefully. The righteous chooses his friends carefully.

[11 : 06] Now we need to heed that warning from Proverbs. Heed the warning, but also hear the positive exhortation. Friendships and relationships are powerful.

They can have a positive influence or a negative influence, but not merely in terms of how things work out in this world. Look on to verse 28.

Eternity is always in view here in the book of Proverbs. Verse 28, In the path of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death.

Life, in the majority of Proverbs, refers to abundant life in fellowship with God, a living relationship that's never envisaged as ending in our death in this world.

It's going beyond. It goes on. So follow the logic. In the path of righteousness is life. Verse 28. And the righteous chooses his friends carefully.

[12 : 05] Verse 26. In other words, the one who is righteous, the one who is in right standing with the Lord, not perfect, not without fault, but rather one whose general direction in life is towards the Lord alone.

In other words, a man or woman of faith. The man and woman of faith, the righteous, those who live by faith, are those who choose their friends carefully.

So given that a friendship may lead us on in the Christian life or drag us away, given that friendships are powerful, there is a necessary implication.

A big question arises in our minds. How can I, how can you, be skillful in relationships, in your friendships, such that I find and make good friends?

Friends who will lead me in a good, positive direction and not a negative one. How can I distinguish between a friend and a fool?

[13 : 11] How do you find good friends? Poorly chosen friends will corrupt and lead into trouble, perhaps even eternal trouble. Just notice the second half of verse 26.

The way of the wicked leads them astray. Poorly chosen friends will pull you away.

I've seen it. I've seen folk dragged away from the faith through a poorly chosen friend or a poorly chosen romantic interest. I've seen it over and over. Friends are powerful.

They wield great influence. But the positive teaching here is that in general, in this life, a good friend or a good spouse will lead you towards the Lord.

They will help you on in the life of faith. So how to find good friends? Three things in terms of seeking friendship.

[14 : 15] Be deliberate, be discerning, seek the diligence. So first, be deliberate. Be deliberate because friends don't just happen. I don't know if making friends is harder than ever.

That evidence from the US I mentioned earlier would indicate it's getting more difficult. People are losing friends, men in particular. In some ways, with travel and technology, it's easier than it ever has been.

But there are still a number of factors that mitigate against genuine friendship in our world. We are extremely mobile. We move from place to place. We rarely settle down in one spot for very long, particularly in a city like Glasgow.

In a church like ours, there's a very high moving through. People come to university, they stay for a couple years, they get a job, then they move on. And so on and so on. We're a very mobile society.

And that makes it difficult to establish and build good friendships. Friendships take time. We're a very mobile society, that makes it difficult. We are consumed by family life, pouring almost every spare minute into our children and what's left over to our spouse, particularly for men.

[15 : 27] That gets squeezed out. Friendship gets squeezed out. We're deceived by email and Facebook and Instagram. We imagine we have hundreds of spectacular friendships when in reality we've got lots of well wishes and acquaintances and few flesh and blood friends.

Social media tricks us into thinking we've got more friends than we actually do. We're also entranced by the one way relationship.

We expend emotional energy as we follow our favourite actor or sports star or strictly come dancing contestants. That's not an illustration born of personal experience, I hasten to add.

But you know what I mean, you can sort of get caught up with somebody else's life. Somebody doesn't know you. But because of their social media presence, because they're always on the TV, you feel like you know them. That's a fake friendship.

You don't really know them. So there's lots of reasons, I think, why in our world friendships are harder than ever. And the answer to all those things is not to expect friendships to just fall into your lap.

[16 : 41] The way to have good friends is to be a good friend. You have to work at it. Look at verse 27. Whoever is slothful will not roast his game, but the diligent man will get precious wealth.

Now it's not just talking about eating. It's a general principle. If you're slothful, don't expect friends. When it comes to friends, don't be slothful, be diligent.

And that means being deliberate. Look around you. Get to know the people in your life at the moment. Start to invest in those here in the church.

If you're not yet a member of the Tron Church, become a member. By doing that, you're demonstrating to everybody else that I'm committing, I'm here for the long term.

I'm investing in this church and in its people and that commitment will invite others to reciprocate. Are you regular and committed to your growth group?

[17 : 43] Are you in a growth group? If not, then you're missing a superb avenue to build good friendships. So be open yourself. Be willing to be known.

Get stuck in with serving. See if you can persuade Josh to be on the welcome team and that way you meet almost everyone that comes through the doors. It's a great way to get to know lots of people very quickly. Don't just slip in at the start of the service and dash away as soon as things finish.

You're not enabling people to get to know you. So put yourself out there. Be friendly. Be willing to be known. And for many of us, that's hard.

Lots of us are by nature introverts, shy, but we've got to put ourselves out there. Be willing to be known. That's the only way you're going to begin to establish trust and build real friendships.

And that building of trust, that takes time. Despite being more connected than ever, friendships I don't think are deeper. I don't really use Facebook anymore, but I think I've got 700 friends on Facebook.

[18 : 50] And I would actually call friends a tiny proportion of that. Maybe less than 5% probably. So trust is not going to be built on Facebook or Instagram or whatever.

Trust is built face to face. It needs to be a deliberate thing. And we need to work hard to build good friendships. It requires deliberate effort.

We can't just expect good friends to fall into our laps. We need to be deliberate to offer friendship to others. And by being a good friend ourselves, we'll find that friendships will start to develop.

It can take time, but it won't happen otherwise. So that's the first thing. We've got to be deliberate. We've got to be thoughtful.

Second, be discerning. Be discerning because friendships are not neutral. Look again at verse 26. The righteous chooses friends carefully, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.

[19 : 58] Friendships are not neutral. They will not leave you unchanged. They will either pull you in the direction of wisdom and righteousness, or they will drag you down towards wickedness and foolishness.

witness. Now, that's verse 26, as we mentioned. The translation, the righteous chooses or searches out his friends carefully is a better translation.

And that word chooses or searches out, it contains within it the image of careful, diligent, really searching examination in order to find out what is concealed, what's really here.

And that is how we are urged to think about friends. We are to choose, to search out, to carefully examine. Think about how much care you take purchasing an inanimate object, maybe a car or a new Hoover.

How many hours of research do you take? a former colleague of mine, he should remain nameless, would spend untold hours researching. If I ever want to buy anything, I ask him because he's researched it.

[21 : 14] But how much careful thought and diligent examination do you undertake when it comes to friendships compared to your average car?

I think we can be far more cavalier about our friendships than we can be about buying consumer objects. We spend more time analyzing the financial package for the car than we do think about the friendship we're going to invest in and pursue.

So think about the friendships you have. Think about the potential friendships you want to invest in. Those friendships will either help you or hinder you in your relationship with the Lord.

I'm not saying for a moment that you ought not to have friendships with those outside the community of faith. of course not. But we're talking about your very closest friendships here.

The three, four, five people that you would call your closest friends. What sort of friends are they? It's good to have a range of friendships but our closest friendships should be with those who share our highest goals and help us to live them out.

[22 : 26] Each one of your closest friends is a huge influencer on your life. All of us are influencers. We may not realize it but we are. We influence our friends and our friends influence us.

So you need to discern what influence, what influence are my closest friends having on me? If you are in a relationship, what influence is your boyfriend or girlfriend having on you?

What is the direction of travel here? Is it towards godliness and growth and Christ-likeness? Is it growing in generosity and service to others? Or is it actually pulling me away into an ever more exclusive relationship which doesn't really care about anyone else around us?

What sort of friendships have you got? Think about them. you are going to be influenced by somebody. That is the reality. So the question is who are going to be your greatest influencers?

C.S. Lewis said on friendship that friendship can be a school of virtue but also a school of vice. It makes men better, good men better and bad men worse.

[23 : 49] So what sort of friendships have you got? We saw the warning last week didn't we of being friendly with an angry man? Proverbs 22 said make no friendship with a man given to anger, no go with a wrathful man lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare.

See people influence us for good or for ill. So be discerning. That's the necessary negative, that's the negative warning but more positively you can think about it this way, pursue the diligence.

Be deliberate, be discerning. Third, when it comes to seeking friendship pursue the diligence. Pursue the diligence.

Friendships you must prioritize them. You need to think about who are going to be your closest friends. You need to think about who you're going to pursue as a potential future husband or wife.

You need to decide, you need to prioritize out of all the people I know, who am I really going to pursue for friendship? And the clear message of the book of Proverbs, the sort of person you ought to seek out to pursue in friendship is one who is diligent.

[25 : 08] Look again at verse 27. Whoever is slothful will not roast his game, but the diligent man will get precious wealth.

The contrast throughout Proverbs but also here in that verse, the contrast between the slothful and the diligent is stark. The slothful, it seems, has all he needs.

He has his game, but he's too lazy to roast it. He can't be bothered. The diligent, however, enjoys the fruits of his labors.

Now, that may not be the most exciting of criteria when it comes to thinking about friends, but pursuing someone who is diligent, that is a wise thing to do.

That sort of person will be a great blessing to you in the long term. Find someone who takes responsibility. Proverbs is full of encouragement to people to take responsibility, not for a second denying God's sovereignty or suggesting that we earn favor through diligence, but the wise man or woman will be a diligent man or woman.

[26 : 20] So think about those you know. Who is diligent in their studies? Who is diligent with their finances? Who is diligent with their church commitments?

Who is diligent with their work? Who is diligent in discipling and disciplining their children? Who is diligent in those things? On the other hand, who is the sluggard?

Who is the slothful one? Who does the absolute minimum possible to keep going in university or in life in general? That is not someone I suggest who you would want to prioritize as a potential best friend or a potential future spouse.

Don't think they'll suddenly change behavior because you've walked into their life. The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, I'm afraid. Now, of course, in God's grace, things turn around.

God is good. He does transform us. But don't be surprised if a slothful friend continues to be slothful. So remember, friendships are powerful.

[27 : 30] They will influence you in one of two directions. It's not neutral. And that can be a wonderful thing. Think about your good friends, those who help you and build you up, help you grow to become a more mature follower of Christ.

Thank God for people like that. I'm so grateful for good friends. But the opposite is also true. They can pull you away. So when it comes to seeking friends, be deliberate, be discerning, pursue the diligence.

That's the first thing, seeking friends. Secondly, being a good friend. How to be a good friend. Two key marks of a good friend.

First, be a good friend marked by faithfulness, not fickleness. Faithfulness, not fickleness. A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.

Chapter 17, verse 17. Do not forsake your friend and your father's friend, and do not go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity. 27, verse 10. A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

[28 : 48] 18, verse 24. Faithfulness and commitment at all times are the mark of a good friend. And the real test, of course, is when difficulties come, when adversity comes, when difficulties crop up, will you stand firm, or you step away?

Will you stand with your friend closer than a brother when illness strikes, or redundancy comes, or financial disaster crushes them? Will you still be there right beside them faithfully, or will fickleness win the day?

one of the things that got me through the winter of lockdown was rereading Lord of the Rings. I'm just going to geek out for a minute, but I really enjoyed reading it again.

And one of the most striking and heartwarming features of that book is its portrayal of friendship, real deep friendships, and particularly the friendship between Frodo and Sam.

And there's one scene where they're struggling up Mount Doom, when Frodo collapses, unable to go any further. And Sam then proceeds to carry him up the mountain, professing that while he cannot carry the ring, he can carry the ring bearer.

[30 : 10] And he utters these words, I cannot carry it for you, but I can carry you. It's a picture of warmth and loyalty and friendship through thick and thin.

Will you be that sort of loyal friend? Will you be the sort of friend that gives? That sort of help when trial comes with no expectation of remuneration or reward or recognition.

Be faithful, not fickle. Second, be a good friend marked by frankness, not flattery.

Be a good friend marked by frankness and not flattery. Chapter 27, verse 6 says, faithful are the wounds of a friend. Profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

When it comes to friendship, you do not want to be a flatterer. You do not want to say only what your friend wants to hear. You do not want to be a blind cheerleader who claps along no matter what your friend does.

[31 : 16] Rather, you should be wise and offer wise counsel, whether your friend enjoys hearing it or not. Sometimes, frankness is required.

Sometimes we do need to inflict wounds. Not that we take any sort of enjoyment from doing so, but because our friend needs to be rescued from their current direction of travel.

We need to say difficult things in order for our friend to come to their senses. Mere flattery and affirming words will not help. Perhaps you've got a friend who is pursuing an unwise friendship or relationship.

Perhaps they're heading towards marriage. Perhaps they are contemplating marrying an angry man as we saw last week. He's angry. Everyone can see it apart from your friend.

A faithful friend will say something. And by saying something now, by inflicting a wound now, you're saving your friend from a potential world of pain later on.

[32 : 29] So sometimes we must say the difficult things. We must inflict a wound. And nobody takes pleasure in that. If you do, then you've probably got a problem.

But if you are weighed down by the concern of speaking to your friend about this matter, that's a good sign. The fact that it weighs heavy on you is a good sign.

A good friend is marked by frankness, not flattery. But all this that's been said so far rests on the fundamental assumption that you are wanting to be a friend in the first place.

Are you willing to be a friend? Willie, in his first chapter of his book, *Aspects of Love*, deals with the topic of friendship. If you've not read it, I would encourage you to do so.

But he makes the point in that chapter that to launch into friendship, it does incur real cost. It can be risky to make that sort of investment, to open ourselves up to the possibility of hurt.

[33 : 35] We've been hurt in the past. We want to protect ourselves against that for the future. And that's maybe understandable. But if that policy is pursued, it will in the end leave us isolated and hardened.

And he quotes from C.S. Lewis, and I'll show you this quote now. C.S. Lewis writes, there is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable.

Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal.

Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries, avoid all entanglements, lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change.

It will not be broken. It will become unbreakable. Impenetrable. Irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least the risk of tragedy, is damnation.

[34 : 47] The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is hell. So, to be a good friend, you must be willing to be a friend.

friend, to be willing, to be potentially hurt, to take a risk. So, to be a good friend means being faithful, not fickle.

It means being frank, not a flatterer, and to be willing to love and to be loved. We must be willing sometimes to suffer in our friendships.

friendships. After all, we are called to follow Christ, to follow his cross-shaped pattern in all of our lives, including our friendships.

friendships. Despite the inevitable sorrows as well as joys of our friendships in this world, we can be assured of his friendship forever. And it's our friendship with the Lord Jesus that is the very fuel that enables every other relationship we enter, especially when the imperfect friendships we experience in this world hurt us and let us down.

[36 : 04] the fact that our friendships will be imperfect is no reason not to pursue them. Let's listen as we close to these words from the Lord Jesus himself, recorded for us in John's Gospel, chapter 15.

Jesus says, this is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

You are my friends if you do what I command you. 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.

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.

These things I command you so that you will love one another. So love one another, friends. Love one another, says the Lord Jesus.

[37 : 22] But above all, to truly be a good friend to others, you must first be a friend of Jesus. That is the very working assumption of the book of Proverbs, to live by wisdom, to follow the way of righteousness, to know the Lord himself.

And it's as we follow him that he enables us to live lives that are wise and not foolish. So to be a truly good friend to others, you must first be a friend of Jesus.

You must be a friend of Jesus to be a friend like Jesus to others. He calls us to love each other as he loves us. And if you don't know that love, then you must.

If you don't know the love of the Lord Jesus Christ, then you must know it. For it's only through friendship with him, it's only through friendship with Jesus, that eternal life and everlasting friendship can be ours.

It's only by knowing for ourselves the great cost he bore so that we could be friends with him, that we can show that love and care for others. That is essential.

[38 : 37] That is fundamental. As we think about friendship, think firstly of our friendship with him. Love one another, says Jesus, as I loved you.

Well, let me pray and then we'll sing to close. Father, we thank you that your word is full of wisdom, wisdom for every aspect of our lives.

Lord, we ask that you would help us to be good friends, to be good friends to those around us, and help us by your mercy to choose friends wisely, to choose our friends with great care.

So please enable us by your spirit, first and foremost, because we're your friends. to be good friends, so equip us, help us, we ask.

In Jesus' name, amen.