Friends & Neighbors
Proverbs

Introduction

According to an October 2023 Meta-Gallup poll - so published just a few months ago - nearly one in four people throughout the world said they are lonely. One in four; 25-percent of the world. That translates to more than a billion individuals. And chances are the numbers are even higher since the poll didn't include the second most populous country in the world, China, with its close to 1.5 billion people.

But just think of that - one out of every four people from Albania to Zimbabwe said they felt either "very or fairly lonely." And another 27-percent said they felt "a little lonely," which means that if the survey is accurate, over half of those surveyed across 142 countries and territories experience some level of loneliness. And young people aged 19-29 reported much higher rates of loneliness than did adults aged 65+.

It turns out that there are health costs to all this loneliness. The World Health Organization, based right down the road in Geneva, reports that loneliness and social isolation can lead to a 30-percent increase in risk of stroke and cardiovascular disease; a 50-percent increase in risk of developing dementia; and a 25-percent increase in risk of early death. In other words, loneliness can kill you.

But in an age of video calls, WhatsApp messages, and social media posts, aren't we more connected now than ever? Thanks to technology, I can now pick up a device and immediately connect with almost anyone I know anywhere in the world, and I probably know more about things going on in their lives that I ever did. What a blessing, right! Right?

With all these friends at the press of a thumb, how could anyone be lonely? But here I think we need to ask ourselves, what is friendship? And have we actually gone and sacrificed quality for quantity? Is it possible that my hundreds or thousands of "friends" on social media may not actually be true friends?

In his book "Made for Friendship" - a book from which I will quote quite a bit - American author and pastor Drew Hunter argues that in this digital age, we have "hollowed out and trivialized" what we mean by friend and friendship. "Friend, he says, has become our title for nice people; we've overextended the term to the point of ambiguity, applying it to almost everyone we know." So it really now can just signify a contact or an acquaintance. It means we can be surrounded by friends - scrolling through post after post of their lives, or briefly chatting with them about superficial things - and yet still feel completely isolated and lonely. So if the term friend can be applied to nearly everyone with whom we interact, then friend really doesn't mean much, does it?

Background

Well, this morning, we're going to look at what the Bible has to say about friends and friendship. But before we do, I think it might be useful to hear what some noted theologians throughout history have said about friends and the importance of friendship:

Early church father Augustine, writing from North Africa in the late fourth and early fifth century, said, "Two things are essential in this world—life and friendship. Both must be prized highly and not undervalued."

Noted eighteenth-century American theologian Jonathan Edwards wrote that friendship "is the highest happiness of all moral agents."

And before that, English evangelical bishop John Charles - J.C. - Ryle had this to say in the seventeenth century…

> "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."

And finally, even famed twentieth century author and theologian C.S. Lewis insisted, "Friendship is the greatest of worldly goods. Certainly to me it is the chief happiness of life."

Essential; highest happiness; brightest sunbeam; chief happiness of life. Now, those are some strong claims about the value and importance of friendship, aren't they? We might even wonder if they're not just a little overstated.

In truth, I think we'll see that Drew Hunter is right when he claims, "Friendship—with one another and with God—is the supreme pleasure of life, both now and forever, and no one can fully enjoy life without it."

Now if friendship is such an essential component of our lives, then we should expect the Bible to have a lot to say on the subject. And we would be right.

As we've been doing for the past few weeks, this morning, we're going to continue our journey through the Book of Proverbs, one of the categories of wisdom literature in the Bible, to glean what it has to say about friendship.

And as we do, let the words of Scottish pastor Hugh Black guide us in this brief journey. He writes of the book of 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."

So if you have your Bibles with you, please turn with me now to the Book of Proverbs. And as you do, I just want to offer up a couple of quick notes that I think will serve us well as we proceed.

First, I plan to jump around a lot throughout the book, so don't feel like you have to keep up with me in flipping back and forth. Instead, you may want to simply write down the chapter and verse numbers I reference to go back and review them later.

Second, it's useful for us to know that the Hebrew word for friend - "Ra'A" - is translated into English here in Proverbs as a number of similar words, including friend, neighbor, and companion. So some of the proverbs at which we will look this morning may use one of these terms, but they all are generally referring to the same thing.

So now I want us to look at three key aspects of Biblical friendship in our time together - and these will serve as the outline for this morning's sermon: 1) What Makes a Bad Friend?; 2) What Makes a Good Friend?; and 3) Who is the Best of Friends?

So 1) What Makes a Bad Friend?; 2) What Makes a Good Friend?; and 3) Who is the Best of Friends?

Let's take a look.

1) What Makes a Bad Friend?

One of the first things you may have noticed in reading Proverbs is that not all of the wisdom expressed is normative, that is not all of it is meant to be followed. In fact, as we'll see, one of the main authors of Proverbs, King Solomon, often simply made observations about the world. And in many cases, those observations were negative; however, even those negative observations can teach us about both the world and our place in it.

Selfish and Self-Seeking

One of the first things we see that makes a bad friend is they are selfish and self-seeking. Proverbs 14:20 says…

> The poor is disliked even by his neighbor, but the rich has many friends

Or a similar sentiment in 19:4…

> Wealth brings many new friends, but a poor man is deserted by his friend

Or how about the reverse a few verses later in 19:6?

> Many seek the favor of a generous man, and everyone is a friend to a man who gives gifts

Now in these three proverbs, I think Solomon would probably have put “friend” in quotation marks, indicating that such behavior is not really a mark of a true friend.

So what’s going on here? These proverbs are warning that there will be people who call themselves friends - or people whom others believe are friends - who are, in fact, simply using friendship as a means to their own selfish ends - as a means to gain wealth, social standing, or some other “benefit” from the relationship. A consumer friendship, if you will.

Maybe you’ve had this happen to you from someone you considered a friend. Or maybe you’ve even done this to others, perhaps without even knowing it. In a sinful, fallen world, Proverbs makes it clear that motives matter, and we know that motives are not always pure. As Christians, we know that our hearts can lie to us, and others’ hearts can lie to them, so we should be wary of those who may simply be seeking “friendships of convenience” out of selfish ambition.

Engages in Malicious Speech or Gossip

Similarly, a bad friend is one who gossips or engages in malicious speech about their so-called friend. We see in 16:28 that…

> A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends

And in 17:9…

> Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends

Church, make no mistake that such talk is sinful. The “whisperer” here is someone who is repeating matters, whether accurate or false, that should not be shared. Not even if the whisperer tries to dress up such gossip as a “prayer request.”

If things are told to us in confidence by a friend, then they should generally remain there. While we can all imagine scenarios where, for someone’s safety, that trust can and should be broken, such cases are few and far between; they are the exceptions, not the rule.

Why is gossip - or the more harmless-sounding, popular term these days of “spilling tea” - so harmful to friendship? Plainly, because it erodes trust and ensures that that person will never ever share such confidential information with “the whisperer” again. That friendship has been severely damaged, and even if it survives, suspicion will likely continue to linger in the mind of the one whose confidence was betrayed.

Have you ever been the victim of untrue rumors? I have, and it's devastating. Sometimes you don't know who started them, who's heard them, and - most upsettingly - who believes them.

Proverbs 22:1 says…

> A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold

When someone gossips about you or slanders you, they rob you of that "good name" - they seem to be actively seeking to present you in the worst possible light, and this is far from the actions of a friend.

Quick Tempered

Thirdly, a bad friend is someone who has a quick or volatile temper. And Proverbs 22:24-26 make it very clear that such people should be avoided…

> Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare

We learn elsewhere from Proverbs 15:18 that…

> A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention.

Or from 14:17 that…

> A man of quick temper acts foolishly, and a man of evil devices is hated.

These are not admirable traits for Christians to have. In his epistle, James calls us to be slow to anger, not just because it quiets contention as we just heard, but also because Proverbs 14:29 says…

> Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly.

Friends seek to understand one another; that's very hard to do when you are quick to anger.

Corrupts You

But there's another reason why such bad friendships are dangerous: it's because we are shaped by those with whom we spend time. Bad friends can corrupt you. Look again at Proverbs 22:24-26. Why should we not spend time with a man given to anger…?

> Lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare

As Christians, it matters with whom we spend our time. Friendships are meant to be close, deep, and personal connections; in those connections, we naturally rub off on one another. As Drew Hunter puts it, "our friends influence the moral direction of our lives." We see this clearly in Proverbs 13:20, and we heard about this when looking at wisdom a few weeks ago…

> Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm

Proverbs is replete with cautions about with whom we choose to develop close relationships. We ignore these warnings at our peril.

Proverbs 29:3…

> He who loves wisdom makes his father glad, but a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth

Proverbs 28:7…

> The one who keeps the law is a son with understanding, but a companion of gluttons shames his father

Or Proverbs 12:26…

> One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor, but the way of the wicked leads them astray

As the saying goes, "character is contagious," which is why we must be wise with whom we share close affections; the closer the connection, the more influence that friendship will have on us.

Now at this point, with such a long list of negatives, you may be wondering why we should even have friendships at all!

I get it, but let's let Proverbs answer this for us with a rather unusual metaphor. Proverbs 14:4 says…

> Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox.

Huh? What this is saying is, "Sure, you can certainly plow the fields yourself with extra time, effort, and expense - or you can have oxen to help you. But with oxen, come

messes." More succinctly, as one of my friends put it, "Friendships leave messes in the barns of our lives, but the benefits FAR outweigh the costs."

Yes, friendships are messy, but they are certainly a mess worth making. However, that's not something you can really do over Facebook or Instagram. With that, let's take a look at..

2) What Makes a Good Friend?

Always Loves

First, we see in Proverbs 17:17 that a good friend is characterized by constant love…

> A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity

Unlike the selfish or self-serving friend we saw earlier, a good friend is not seeking to use you for his or her ends, he or she is seeking to enjoy your company for what it is. Rather than a consumer friendship, as Hunter puts it, it is a constant friendship.

The key here is consistency - regardless of the ups and downs of life - a good friend's love is steady and constant. We see here that adversity does not deplete this love, rather it further refines and strengthens it. In fact, Proverbs 27:10 cautions…

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

That is to say, with close, good friends, sometimes the bonds are even stronger than those of family (i.e., than those of blood). If we seek to be good friends, we should be there and ready to be counted upon - as if we were family.

As Christians, we recognize this, don't we? This is why we've adopted familial names to acknowledge the bonds we share as believers, calling each other "brother" and sister."

Even more clear is Proverbs 18:24…

A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother

Here, we are back to my earlier question about quantity or quality when it comes to friendships. The health of our relationships is not found in the abundance of people we know, rather it's found in the intimacy and depth of the closest relationships we have.

For many of us - hopefully for all of us who are married - our spouse is our closest friend. So much so that we entered a covenantal relationship with him or her to actually remake that friendship as a family bond. But this is a special type of

friendship; here, we're looking at the more traditional definition of close friendships - men being friends with other men and women being friends with other women.

And we see that this constant love will likewise permeate all of the other characteristics of good friends.

Trustworthy, Forgiving, and Considerate

Second, we see that a good friend is trustworthy, forgiving, and considerate. Unlike, the bad friend who gossips and talks behind someone's back, a good friend has that person's back; as we said, they are to be counted on in time of adversity.

Proverbs 3:27-29 offers good counsel here…

> Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it" —when you have it with you. Do not plan evil against your neighbor, who dwells trustingly beside you

You need not worry that a good friend is not being truthful with you. If he or she can do you good in some way, they will not hesitate and will do so without delay. A good friend thinks the best of you even when they may know the worst of you.

Unlike this bad friend in Proverbs 25:18…

> A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a war club, or a sword, or a sharp arrow

…a good friend defends you, stands up for you, and speaks the truth about you, even when you are not there.

Likewise, the constant love between two friends means that they can forgive each other when difficulties, misunderstandings, and sins arise between them.

Proverbs 10:12 says…

> Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses

And we know from looking at Proverbs 17:9 earlier that…

> Whoever covers an offense seeks love

Here again, I'm helped by Drew Hunter's words: "Constant friendships weather inconstancies with grace." This means that when we inevitably screw up or are inconsiderate with our good friend, they will understand - just as we will understand when they screw up with us.

Or as Peter puts it in 1 Peter 4:8…

> Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins

And unlike that quick-tempered bad friend, Proverbs 19:11 tells us that for the good friend…

> Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.

It's worth noting here that "overlook" does not simply mean bite one's tongue and continue to let the offense bother you, just not saying anything. That's not being a good friend. Rather, it means simply letting the offense pass by, like water off the back of a duck, because of the love and trust you have for your friend.

It means showing mercy, even when it may not be deserved. Proverbs 21:10 tells us this is the opposite of what the wicked do…

> The soul of the wicked desires evil; his neighbor finds no mercy in his eyes

As the old aphorism goes: to have a friend, you have to be a friend, and one of the surest ways to be a good friend is to forgive your friend when they do something wrong.

Similarly, good friends are considerate friends; they are self-aware enough to know if and when they're crossing the boundaries of their friendship.

For example, Proverbs 25:17 advises…

> Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house, lest he have his fill of you and hate you

Now, is this saying not to ever really visit your friend? No. We must read proverbs with humility and take into account context and experience. This is simply saying, "Hey, sometimes your friend may need some space," so be considerate.

I like how the ESV Expository Commentary put it… "The present culture is at far less risk of crowding one another physically, but we may be worse off with our around-the-clock presence on social media." Something to think about - maybe over lunch with a friend.

Or how about this one from Proverbs 27:14…

> Whoever blesses his neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing

I am sure many a night owl has quoted this verse when rebuking a friend, a roommate, or a spouse! And I think we who live in Switzerland can certainly relate to this, especially given many of the Sunday noise ordnances we must navigate. Feel free to replace "loud voice" with "mowing the lawn" or "washing your car" or even "doing your laundry" in some apartment buildings.

But why is this in here? Is it just to protect people against loud voices before they've had their first cup of coffee? Probably not. I think it's saying that we should practice self-restraint with our friends, being careful not to be thoughtless in our actions. Good friends care about others' feelings and do what they can to protect them.

Speaks the Truth to You in Love

Finally, a good friend is someone who will speak the truth to you - but do so in love.

Ephesians 4:15 calls us to speak "truth in love," and this is nowhere more important than in our most intimate and deep personal friendships.

Sometimes, that truth comes in the form of encouragement and comfort, which is something a good friend does not withhold.

Proverbs 27:9 blesses us with this wonderful truth…

> Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel

"Earnest" here meaning genuine and sincere. When we develop a friendship forged in love and trust, that allows us to be open and honest with one another; to be transparent with that person about our lives. And in that transparency, we have given permission to that friend to speak into our lives about what they see.

We know from Proverbs 12:25 that…

> Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down,
> but a good word makes him glad

As good friends, we are called to provide those good words, particularly when our friend is anxious or depressed; words that give life, build up, and encourage our friend to continue walking on their Christian path. Or as Hebrews 10:24 puts it…

> Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works

Yet sometimes, being a good friend means confronting our friend with some hard truths because we love them and have their best interests at heart. It can mean gently correcting them with the truth, which they may not be able to see at the moment. And

let's be honest, if we believe that our hearts lie to us as we mentioned earlier, then we will all need such correction from time to time.

In fact, Proverbs 29:5 makes it clear that…

> A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet

Flattery is simply telling someone what they want to hear, regardless of whether or not it's true. While in contrast, Proverbs 27:5-6 say…

> Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

There may be times when difficult "wounds" must be delivered to those we love, when the most "unloving" thing to do is to actually remain silent, but a good friend knows that these times are rare and are buried under an avalanche of previous affirmations and encouragements given to their friend over the long history of the friendship.

Perhaps even more importantly, a good friend knows that the motive of their own heart matters in when and how they choose to confront their friend. That balance of speaking truth in love is critical; such candor must only be offered in building up that friend, not in tearing them down. Or as Proverbs 27:17 says…

> Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another

The real test will be if your friend feels the love coming from your words even as they "wound" him or her with the truth.

My former pastor Mark Dever put it this way:

> "Yet when we speak words of correction, our object should not simply be our own self-expression ("I just need to get this off my chest"). No, the goal must be our friends' benefit. Before confronting them, ask yourself, "Will this serve them and build them up?""

In fact, Ephesians 4:29 exhorts us to…

> Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

We must let the motives of our heart be the yardstick by which we measure when and how to speak truth in love.

At this point, you may be equally as discouraged about what makes a good friend as you were with our description of a bad friend. Perhaps you are disheartened because you don't have any close friends who encapsulate these positive traits. Or perhaps

you're troubled that you, yourself, have fallen far short of being such a friend to others and can't imagine how anyone could meet these standards.

If so, then I think it's time we turn to our third point…

3) Who Makes the Best Friend?

Perhaps you're here and you're not yet a Christian; maybe you don't agree that you can't just have friendships that serve your own interests or you question what's wrong with telling off someone who's not been a good friend to you.

If that's you, please know that we are so glad you are here. For the next couple of minutes, I'm going to explain why we Christians believe, as the late American theologian Tim Keller put it, "The entire history of redemption - in a sense - is a giant, cosmic act of friendship."

In fact, what if I told you that friendship has existed even before the world began or the first person ever lived? It's true.

You see, the all-powerful Creator of the universe, who has always existed, has always done so in three distinct persons - God, the Father; God, the Son; and God, the Holy Spirit - what we call the trinity. And even before the world was created, our triune God existed in perfect harmony and friendship among Himself in these three persons. So anyone who tells you that God created humankind because He was lonely - lonely just like 25% of the people in the world - is just plain wrong; God has never been lonely.

But God did create the world and mankind in order to manifest His glory. Unfortunately, all of us have disobeyed our holy Maker and sinned against Him. For that, we deserve the eternal punishment of separation from God. But instead, God the Father sent His Son to earth to become a man named Jesus, who lived a life of perfect obedience to His Father - the life that we were supposed to live but could not.

And then, having done nothing to deserve death, Jesus was crucified on a cross and died, taking upon Him the underserved punishment of all of us who would turn from our sins and put our faith and trust in His saving work. He did this while we were yet His enemies. And on the third day, Jesus rose again from the grave to show that His sacrifice was sufficient payment to redeem God's rebellious people and reconcile them to Him - thereby making us His friends. And Jesus now sits in heaven at the right hand of the Father interceding on our behalf. Because of this "giant, cosmic act of friendship" we can now enjoy an eternity with God.

You see, Jesus Christ, is the best of friends for all of us who believe in Him. If that's not you here today, please find someone around you to explain how you too can be forgiven of your sins and know this ultimate friendship. Or come talk to me after the service; I would love to tell you more about this good news.

Jesus is the friend who can perfectly love at all times; Jesus is the friend who is truly closer than a brother; Jesus is the friend whose love covers, not just a multitude, but all of our sins.

In John's gospel, Jesus himself says the following in 15:13:

> Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends

Jesus makes clear that He is the one who laid down His life for us, so that we can now call Him friend. In fact, even though He is our God and our King, a couple verses later, in John 15:15, Jesus says…

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

Westlake Church, Jesus is the truest of friends who has never forsaken us and never will; who ceaselessly forgives us time and again when we sin; and whose loving, gentle correction is filled with nothing but the purest of love for those whom He disciplines.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with the words of the great nineteenth-century English preacher Charles Spurgeon, who said, "He who would be happy here must have friends; and he who would be happy hereafter, must, above all things, find a friend in the world to come, in the person of God."

Truly, what a friend we have in Jesus! Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the only friend who could ever bear Your wrath to save us from our sins. May the example of Jesus, and your wisdom to us in the Book of Proverbs, serve us in being better friends to others - and in doing so, to reflect your love to those around us. It's in the mighty name of our friend and savior, Jesus, we pray. Amen.