

WISE FRIENDSHIPS**PROVERBS 17:17**

It was a quiet December evening in the oncology unit at Georgetown University Hospital. In Room 11 a man lay critically ill. The patient was Jack Swigert, the man who had piloted the Apollo 13 lunar mission back in 1970. He was now a Congressman-elect from the state of Colorado. But, sadly, cancer waged a deadly assault on his body. There with Swigert was a tall, quiet visitor sitting in the same spot he had occupied almost every night since Swigert had been admitted. That other man was Bill Armstrong, who was – at that time – a US Senator from Colorado. Armstrong was chairman of the Senate subcommittee on Social Security and was one of the busiest, most powerful men in Washington.

But Bill Armstrong wasn't visiting Jack Swigert to discuss politics. Sen. Armstrong was there because he was both a deeply committed follower of Jesus and Swigert's friend. Armstrong leaned over the bed and said quietly, "Jack, you're going to be all right. God loves you. I love you. Your friends are praying for you. You're going to be all right." The only response he got was Jack's uneven breathing. Sen. Armstrong pulled his chair closer to the bed, opened his Bible, and began reading, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Time passed. As Sen. Armstrong started to read another portion of Scripture, he heard Swigert's ragged breathing stop. He called for help. As he watched a nurse examine his friend, Bill Armstrong realized there was nothing more he could do. Jack Swigert was dead. Politicians are very busy people. But from Bill Armstrong's perspective, there was nothing dramatic or sacrificial about his actions. He was just being a friend.

We're in the midst of a study of Proverbs entitled *How To Live Wisely & Well*. How we treat people, how we handle difficult people, how we act toward and react to people – in other words, relationships – is a major theme in Proverbs. God made it clear that learning how to be a true friend as well as developing true friends are keys to true success in life. People matter to God. Relationships matter to God. The people you bring into your life in terms of relationships either enrich you or impoverish you. They either enhance your life or detract from it. People either bring you closer to God or pull you away from Him. Relationships and friendships demand a great deal of wisdom and that's what Proverbs is all about. It's wisdom straight from God Himself. So, let's observe what it has to say to us about the importance of...

SELECTING TRUE FRIENDS.

Life will bring many people across your pathway. But only a few will become your friends. The writer of Proverbs assumes you will need to be careful about choosing who will be your friends and you will also need to be intentional about becoming a real friend to others. This is just too important an area of life to leave to chance. Because other people will have a profound effect on you, you must be thoughtful about who you invite to enter into a deep, long term relationships with you. Here's three qualifications you will discover throughout Proverbs.

First of all, select people to be your friends who have a godly character. God's Word says, "Whoever loves a pure heart and gracious speech will have the king as a friend" (Pro 22:11 NLT) That verse describes two qualities you need to seek out in a friend. The first one is a pure heart. No, you'll never be able to find a perfect person to be your friend, but, yes, you can seek out and find people who are authentic and have integrity. How do you know? The proverb we just read tells us to observe what comes out of their mouths. In other words, the second quality to be looking for is gracious speech. It reminds me of something Jesus said, "For whatever is in your heart determines what you say." (Matt 12:34 NLT)

Observe how a potential friend uses his or her tongue. Is this person critical or encouraging? Does he or she tell the truth or embellish and exaggerate? Do they gossip about or, instead, protect the reputation of other people? Is he or she a flirt or are proper boundaries observed with the opposite sex? Sooner or later, your mouth will reveal the condition of your heart. The proverb teaches that when you find a person of both integrity and sensitivity, you've found great friend material. If even a king should seek out people like that for friendship, so should you! When you choose your friends and when you seek to be a friend, God's Word never tells us to look for outstanding talents, intellectual brilliance, or verbal eloquence. Instead, we are called to seek out people with a godly character – a pure heart and gracious speech, to be specific.

Secondly, select people to be your friends who demonstrate the ability to be faithful. When a friend is going through a tough time, you wouldn't think of deserting or pushing them away, right? In the same way, when you're the one going through the fires of some adversity, a true friend won't abandon you either. The love and caring needs to flow in both directions – back and forth – and not just one way. A true friend knows how to give and receive faithfulness. Consider this proverb, "Don't leave your friends or your parents' friends and run home to your family when things get rough; better a nearby friend than a distant family." (Pro 27:10 MSG)

A real friend know that to cultivate and maintain a relationship, it takes time and energy. People are very high on his or her list of what's really important in life. People just downright matter to a person you want as your friend. Joseph Rucker Lamar was a US Supreme Court justice from 1911-1916. He wrote something very interesting in his will. After his death, this sentence was found in it, "The Testator leaves to his family not only his money and land; but also his friendships, many and numerous, in the hope that they will be cherished and continued." Isn't that great? Something tells me Judge Lamar was a true friend because he himself valued faithfulness. When you find a person of integrity and sensitivity who will stick by you in life come what may, you've found a true friend. Treasure that man. Treasure that woman.

Thirdly, select people to be your friends who will help you help you grow as a person. One of my favorite proverbs says, "As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend." (Pro 27:17 NLT) How do you sharpen a knife? Back in Bible times, you rubbed the metal across another piece of metal in such a way that its sharpness was restored. You and I rub up against a lot of different people in life, so to speak. Here's a fact. Some

people just have a way of making you “sharper” as a person while others make you “duller.” Some people lift you up; others drag you down. Some people will draw you closer to Jesus; others have a way of pulling you away from Him. Do you want to be wise? Do you want true, biblical success in life? Do you want to live wisely and well? Then, carefully select people to be your closest friends who will help you grow into the person God wants you to be instead of people who will just let you settle for mediocrity.

I believe this is one of the great blessings of being a part of a church like ours. We can sharpen each other in our journey with God and towards Heaven. Here’s a person who can help me be more patient in times of trouble. I get sharpened. There’s a person who can help me develop a better prayer life. I get sharpened. Here’s a person who can give me deeper insight into the Bible. I get sharpened. There’s a person who models an outstanding marriage and how to raise kids well. I get sharpened. Years ago now, I remember someone telling me that another man in the church I served at that time had taught him so much about how to handle his finances in a godly, biblical way. Ironically, the two men never discussed finances directly. But one man carefully observed how the other man conducted his financial affairs. He got sharpened.

Let me say something to everyone here today, but especially to visitors or to those of you who are new to this congregation. The kind of wonderful relationships Proverbs describes will only ever happen if you go beyond just attending the worship service. All too many people come to church assuming they will make new friends (a worthwhile assumption), but then they only ever attend the worship service (a naïve assumption). As important and central as corporate worship is to our spiritual lives, it’s not designed to help you make true friends. You need to join one of our adult Bible classes on Sundays. Or, you need to get into a discipleship triad. That’s probably the single, best way to develop deep, long lasting friendships or relationships in our church. We have another discipleship ministry in our church – re:generation – that offers a similar opportunity. Here at KRBC, we believe being a disciple of Jesus requires relationships with other people who want to follow Jesus. ROPES is our picture of a disciple. The R stands for Relationships. You don’t get closer to Jesus by being a “lone ranger.” It happens best when you’re in quality, intentional relationship with His other disciples.

Or you need to start serving Jesus through one of our ministry teams. That’s another great way to get to know people. That’s where relationships can blossom. One of the things I love best about our church is the fact we have people here who’ve been friends with one another for twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years. They love each other. They encourage each other. They’re there for each other. Most importantly, they sharpen each other. God has put people here at KRBC who can sharpen your walk with Jesus in so many ways. And you can sharpen us as well! But you’ve got to do more than just show up for a worship service on Sundays. Take advantage of the opportunity! Proverbs provides so much wisdom about the value of relationships and friendships. For example, it also underlines the marks or the...

SIGNS OF TRUE FRIENDS.

The Bible says, “Love prospers when a fault is forgiven, but dwelling on it separates close friends.” (Pro 17:9 NLT) So, it’s obvious a true friend is both forgiving and trustworthy. God just assumes people will sin and make mistakes. We all blow it from time to time. Notice what a true friend does in such a case. He doesn’t keep bringing it up to you or somehow take pleasure in the fact you’ve made a mistake. When you express your remorse and grief over how you failed, a true friend accepts your apology graciously and lays the hurt aside. A true friend never keeps harping on your mistake. Notice also a friend provides as much “damage control” as possible. There’s a gracious willingness to overlook how you failed because your true friend loves you. The fact is all of us have bad days, make unfortunate statements, and do hurtful things.

A true friend doesn’t always feel the need to straighten you out this very moment. A true friend is able to let some things go and doesn’t feel the need to correct you every minute of the day. I like how English novelist Mary Ann Evans – better now by her pen name, George Eliot - put it. “Oh, the comfort, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person, having neither to weigh thoughts, nor measure words, but pouring them all out, just as they are, chaff and grain together, certain that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and with a breath of kindness blow the rest away.” Isn’t that a great way of putting it? That’s what true friends do for one another. They’re both forgiving and trustworthy.

As you go through life, you will learn some things about your friends that will shock you, sadden you, or discourage you. What does a true friend do then? Don’t reveal what doesn’t have to be revealed. Don’t discuss the failures and sins of people with others. The Bible has his marvelous statement about relational wisdom, “Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins.” (1 Pt 4:8 NLT) This is where being forgiving and being trustworthy complement each other. The person who just must tell you every juicy detail or that person who just must discuss the shortcomings of others – steer clear of them. Don’t invest your time and energy in a friendship with that kind of person. Why not? Because you can’t trust them. You could very well become the topic of that person’s next conversation.

Perhaps the most important sign of a true friend is this one: he or she loves you unconditionally. One of the best verses in Proverbs on friendship is this one, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” (Pro 17:17 NIV) Do you remember Jim Bakker who had a Christian ministry back in the 1980s called the PTL Club? He was involved in a colossal scandal, was thoroughly disgraced, and went off to prison for a few years. More recently, he’s been back on TV with another show. I was never a fan of Jim Bakker and never will be, but I was moved by a story he tells about how Billy Graham’s family reached out to him. When he was transferred to his last prison stop, Franklin Graham – Billy Graham’s son – visited him and said he wanted to help Bakker out when he got out of prison – with a job, a house to live in, and a car. It was Bakker’s fifth Christmas in prison. He thought it over and said, “Franklin, you can’t do this. It will hurt you. The Grahams don’t need my baggage.” Franklin Graham looked at Bakker and said, “Jim, you were my friend in the past and you are my friend now. If anyone doesn’t like it, I’m looking for a fight.”

When Jim Bakker got out of prison, the Grahams sponsored him, paid for a house for him to live in temporarily, and gave him a car to drive. His first Sunday out, the late Ruth Graham – Billy Graham’s wife – called the halfway house where Bakker was living and asked permission for him to come to church with her that Sunday. When Bakker got to the church, the pastor welcomed him and sat him with the Graham family. There were two whole rows of them – aunts, uncles, cousins. The organ began playing and the place was full except for a seat next to Bakker himself. Then the doors opened and in walked Ruth Graham. She walked down the aisle and sat next to inmate 07407-058. He'd only been out of prison 48 hours, but she told the world that morning that Jim Bakker was her friend. “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.”

When do you discover who is a true friend? Not in the good times of life, but instead in the bad, challenging times. You always discover your truest friends in life’s valleys not on top of life’s mountains. Anyone can be your friend when life is going well, but a real friend is there for you when life tumbles in on itself. A true friend loves you when you’re up and loves you even more when you’re down. A true friend loves you when you’re right and even when you’re wrong. A true friend never approves of everything you do, but they will always be faithful to you. A true friend loves you when you do well, but even more when you fail. You’ve heard of fair weather friends? Foul weather friends are the only ones worth having in this life! And it’s the only kind of friend worth being to others, too. Proverbs assumes you will automatically gather true friends by being one yourself.

Here's one more sign of a true friend from Proverbs. They counsel and confront you when necessary. I add “when necessary” because there are folk out there who sincerely believe their spiritual gift is to straighten out everybody else! I don’t know about you, but I try and avoid people like that and I don’t seek deep friendships with them. Be that as it may, a true friend knows when and how to speak into your life. And when it’s done by the leading of the Holy Spirit, it’s a precious, wonderful gift. Two proverbs underline this aspect of friendship. “Wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses from an enemy.” (Pro 27:6 NLT) “The heartfelt counsel of a friend is as sweet as perfume and incense.” (Prov 27:9 NLT) Back in Bible times, only the very rich could afford perfume and incense. God was saying here that when a true friend give you advice and counsel, it’s a gift to be enjoyed and highly valued. Their counsel ought to be sweet to you. By the same token, maybe the hardest thing a true friend ever has to do is confront you or me about an attitude or an action that needs change or correction. Someone who isn’t really your friend will care less if you blow it. But a true friend is able to speak the truth in love to you. Sure, it may very well be painful to be confronted and corrected by your friend, but if you’re wise you’ll acknowledge it as being for your own good. Take and receive it for the gift and blessing it’s meant to be.

Let me close with this thought. There are many verses in Proverbs about relationships and friendship. Every one of them is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus. He is and will always be your greatest Friend. I think of this proverb, “There are ‘friends’ who destroy each other, but a real friend sticks closer than a brother.” (Pro 18:24 NLT) Who is more faithful than Jesus? Who has more godly character than Jesus? Who will help you

grow more as a person? Who is more forgiving? Who is more trustworthy? Who loves you more? Who is more gracious when you need counsel or correction? And who will stick closer to you in life's most difficult and challenging moments than Jesus? The Bible gives Jesus many names: Savior, Lord, God, King, the Alpha and the Omega, just to name a few. But He's also your Friend. To cultivate and enjoy that friendship with Jesus, your Greatest Friend, is the greatest mission of your life and mine.

While she was a college student, Heidi Neumark took a year off from prestigious Brown University to serve as a volunteer with a group called Rural Mission. She was sent to Johns Island – off the coast of South Carolina. She met a woman there by the name of Miss Ellie who lived miles down a dirt road in a one room, wooden home. Miss Ellie was somewhere between 90-100 years old, but she still chopped her own firewood and stacked it into neat piles behind the house. Heidi loved to visit Miss Ellie. They'd sit in old rocking chairs on the front porch and drink tall glasses of sweet tea while Miss Ellie told Heidi stories about life on Johns Island.

Miss Ellie had a good friend named Netta whom she'd known since they were little girls. In order to get to Netta's house, Miss Ellie had to walk for miles through fields of tall grass. It was home to numerous poisonous snakes – coral snakes, rattlesnakes, water moccasins, and copperheads. Netta's home was not actually all that far from Miss Ellie's place. A sizeable stream that cut them off from each other. You had to walk quite a distance to get to the place where it narrowed enough to cross. Heidi felt sorry for Miss Ellie having to take this long, dangerous trek through the tall grass to visit her friend Netta. But then Heidi hit on the perfect plan. Heidi arranged with some men to build a simple plank bridge across the stream. She scouted out the ideal location. She bought and helped to carry the planks to the location herself. The bridge was built in a day. Heidi was so excited to see how Miss Ellie would react to this new bridge that would allow her to visit her friend more easily. She practically dragged Miss Ellie off her front porch to show it to her. "Look," Heidi said, "a shortcut for you to visit Netta!"

But Miss Ellie's face didn't register the grateful, happy look Heidi anticipated. Instead, for a long time, Miss Ellie looked puzzled. Then she shook her head and looked at Heidi as though she was the one who needed pity. "Child, I don't need a shortcut." Then, she told Heidi about all of her other friends she kept up with on her way to visit Netta. A shortcut would only cut her off from Mr. Jenkins with whom she always swapped gossip. It would cut her off from Miss Hunter who always looked forward to Miss Ellie's quilt scraps. She'd miss out on the raisin wine at another friend's house which was given in exchange for Miss Ellie's biscuits. She'd also miss out on the opportunity to visit the "old folks" who might be sick along the route to Netta's. "Child," Miss Ellie said again to Heidi, "can't take shortcuts if you want friends in this world. Shortcuts don't mix with love."

God is a relational Being. He created us to enter into and enjoy relationships. Some of those relationships are supposed to become deep friendships. God's Word instructs us today to be wise when we select our friends. And be wise when you attempt to be a friend. That's one more way to live wisely and well.