

# **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

## **Sermon Series: Cultivating a Knack for Life**

(Studies in Solomon's Proverbs)

### **The Wisdom of Friendship**

(Proverbs)

Study #2

#### **Introduction: Radishes vs. asparagus...**

Have I mentioned that I enjoy vegetable gardening? Yes, it's a challenge to grow edibles here in South Texas where there is too much heat, not enough rain, and lousy soil. But I like it. Maybe you do, too.

My standard "crops" are tomatoes, peppers, beans, and okra, lettuce, Swiss chard, spinach, and broccoli.

I will admit to having never planted radishes. I don't much like radishes and my cardinal law of gardening is that I only plants vegetables I (or Kathy) like to eat. (I made the mistake of planting cauliflower one year, but fortunately, none of it produced.)

At the same time, radishes would be a nice crop to grow. If all goes well, from the day that you plant them until harvest is thirty days! One month and you can pick radishes. Sadly, at the end of the day, though, all you have is - radishes.

On the other hand, there is asparagus. Asparagus is one of my favorite vegetables. It's also pretty expensive in the store and so it would be a great cash crop.

I've planted asparagus three times over the years and have never had a successful harvest. Asparagus requires a lot of work and a lot of time (three years until harvest!). To this point I haven't been willing to put in the time or the effort to win the asparagus prize.

The lesson of the radish and the asparagus is that a plant that requires little yields little; a plant that requires much yields much.

This morning we're exploring the book of Proverbs to find wisdom from Solomon as we delve into the realm of relationships.

We will find that we can dabble and piddle in the garden of friendship if we wish. We can plant "radish relationships" that require little of us. Those relationships will quickly bring a small harvest.

Or, we can commit to the more exhausting, but infinitely more rewarding cash crop of deep friendship, an asparagus relationship that will take time and energy to develop, but will in the end bring a rich harvest.

*Proverbially speaking...*

Last Sunday we began our series in Proverbs. King Solomon wrote this book to give us practical advice that will lead to a God-honoring life. He says that the key to that kind of a life is *wisdom*.

We Westerners may think of wisdom as the task of untangling tangled philosophical knots. That is not what the Bible means by the word.

Solomon has in mind something extremely practical and down to earth. Biblically speaking, wisdom is *skill*<sup>1</sup> linked to *common sense* under *the fear of God*.<sup>2</sup>

Today will be the first of several excursions we will take into Proverbs as we look into themes that Solomon addresses.

Now, of course it is possible to study Proverbs like you might study other Bible books.

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<sup>1</sup> There are a couple of fascinating uses of the word "wisdom" in the Old Testament. In Job 39:17, the ostrich's lack of ability to rear her young is seen as a lack of wisdom (i.e. she has no skill in mothering). Then, in Jeremiah 4:22, the prophet rebukes the Jews for their sin. But in so doing, he says that they have "*skill*" (the word is "*chokmah/wisdom*") *in doing evil!*" They are good at sin!

<sup>2</sup> The fear of God is a recognition of the fact that He is our judge, He is majestic, and He is Lord.

We just concluded a study of Romans looking at it verse by verse. And it is possible to study Proverbs that way (as was proven by the men's Saturday morning Bible study over the course of some years), but the nature of these thirty one chapters lends itself well to thematic studies.

And Solomon speaks to many, many themes!

He talks about the transcendent value of worship and the need for diligence in work (as opposed to the habits of the sluggard). He speaks of the need for sexual and emotional self-control (also of the beauty of sex in marriage). He urges us to compassion and to a ministry mindset. He gives guidance on right and wrong ways to handle money, how to deal with those in authority - and much more besides!

Over the next few weeks we'll give ourselves to unraveling some of the wisdom this book contains in some of these areas. But this morning, we're going to listen to Solomon's advice on the importance of nurturing a close connection with a few friends.

*A word about friendship...*

When I say "friend" you may think of a politician's reference to his donors or you may think of a TV show.

But Jesus forever elevated the whole idea of friendship when He referred to us, His followers, as His "**friends**." That's right. Our Savior calls us His friends. (John 15:15)

From a number of passages in Proverbs, we're going to discover that if we would be wise, we will passionately pursue friendship.<sup>3</sup>

You know as well as I do that there are forces at work today working against us building great friendships.

- High-tech is great, but high-tech gadgets can keep us from high-touch relating.
- Busy schedules can speak of a full life, but our busy-ness can also communicate, "*I'm too busy. Don't come near me.*"
- Our society is transient (San Antonio, in particular!), and the coming and going of people can tempt us to think that the pain of having friends ripped away due to moves means that we shouldn't get close to them in the first place!

Still, while we may be tempted to avoid deep friendships, we hunger and thirst for them. We need friendship. And Solomon, the author of Proverbs, says "*Great!*"

He wants us to move into the world of friendship armed with wisdom. So, our first pass through Proverbs looking at friendship will find him issuing some friendly warnings. The first one is found in Proverbs 19.

About some things it is true that if it waddles like a duck and quacks like a duck, it is probably a duck. But not everything that looks like a friend is a friend. There are counterfeits out there.

For instance, we should be aware that some friends are simply the best friends money can buy.

### **Friendship's Red Flag Warnings!**

#### **Beware the Counterfeit Friend**

*The best "friends" money can buy*

***[19:4] Wealth adds many friends***

***But a poor man is separated from his friend.***

and

***[19:6] Many will entreat the favor of a generous man,***

***And every man is a friend to him who gives gifts.***

Wise King Solomon tells us that if we have something to give (money, popularity, time, or power) watch out!

<sup>3</sup> The most common Hebrew word for "friend" can also be translated "neighbor." While at times the word signifies only "the other person" in conversation (who may be a virtual stranger), yet at other times it signifies a person with whom we have the closest fellowship. This is, in fact, the normal sense when we read of the friend in the book of Proverbs.

People will flock to you. But these “friends” who surround you may be out to fleece you. These are not the kinds of friends we are looking for.

You can bet that as a king, Solomon knew about this phenomenon, first-hand.

A king’s entourage will consist of some friends AND some people who surround him just because of his fame and fortune. Powerful people in our own world experience much the same thing.

If you’re a main act rock star, a politician on the rise, or a star athlete, you’ll be flocked by “friends.”<sup>4</sup>

Lose an election, tough, or lose a step on the field and your friends may desert you.

In addition to those who are friends for sale, there are others who masquerade as friends. They want you to think that they are friends, but they’re not. Here’s a verse we’ll see a couple of times this morning. This time we’re keying in on the second line.

*“Friends” with an agenda*

***[27:6] Faithful are the wounds of a friend,  
But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.***

This “friend” greets you with the greeting customary to a friend. In the Near East, that’s a kiss. In our own day, think of the warm embrace or the firm handshake.

But, this “friend’s” kiss doesn’t express sincerity or affection. He just wants to take you in so that he can get from you what he wants.

Here’s how the world is supposed to work: God gave us things to use and people to treasure. Sadly, it is not uncommon to see people used and things treasured.

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<sup>4</sup> One of rock music’s early stars, Janis Joplin, uttered a comment that has been quoted through the years. After a concert only months before her suicide she said, *“I have just made love to 25,000 people, and I am going home alone.”*

If we would be wise we will keep our eye out for fake friends and have nothing to do with them.

Now, most people with a little grey have had sad experience with the counterfeit friend and many who aren’t yet grey have learned that all that glitters, friend-wise, is not gold. So, a whole bunch of us don’t need Solomon’s grave warnings.

But if you are young, or if you haven’t yet found yourself in the crosshairs of someone who has wanted to use you, and uses the guise of being a friend to get what they want, listen carefully.

Beware. Be wise. Be on the lookout for people who would take advantage of you. Run from them like the plague. To do anything else is simply foolish.

We find another friendship warning in Proverbs. We’ll see this verse again, too. This time we’re focusing on the first line.

### **Friend vs. Acquaintance**

***[18:24] A man of too many friends comes to ruin,  
But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.***

Here is a guy who’s got a ton of friends. His friends cover mile after square mile.

But, these friendships all run about two inches deep. There is no danger of drowning in these friendships. Sadly, there is also little chance he’ll find much refreshment or help or encouragement from these friendships.

Solomon says that those who surround themselves only with such superficial friends come to ruin. We need more than this “surfacy” kind of friendship.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> One wise man commented, “One friend in a lifetime is much; two are many; three are hardly possible.”

It is tempting to hold people at the perimeter of our lives - arms length seems about right - to not let them into our confidence and to run from intimate friendships.

And it is easier (in the short run) to establish acquaintance-level relationships with several dozen people rather than forge a few, meatier friendships. But, surfacy won't work for long and it definitely doesn't work when the chips are down.

There can be no doubt about it. The pursuit of friendship involves dangers. Friendship is tough! In fact, the only thing more dangerous than friendship is not having friends.

### A Word to the "Lone Ranger"

*[18:1] He who separates himself seeks his own desire,  
He quarrels against all sound wisdom.*

The "Lone Ranger" is iconic Americana. One good guy (plus an invaluable Tonto) stops crime in the wild west. I trust you've seen the trailer for the new Lone Ranger movie? It does look fun!

The Lone Ranger speaks of rugged individualism. *"I've got this. No problem."*

We all admire responsibility and independence. The Lord expects us to take care of our own obligations. But if we separate ourselves from friends and consider ourselves personal islands with no need for connection, we've walked a foolish road.

This is the loner, and the loner is swimming in dangerous waters.

So, there are imposters posing as friends we need to avoid. There are "friends" who can be bought, "friends" who would take advantage, and "friendships" that only touch the surface. None of this is what we need.

But we do NEED friends. Not counterfeits. We need the real thing!

I'm told that US Treasury officials whose job is to identify counterfeit money are trained first to identify the real thing. When they know the real thing cold, they can spot the funny money every time.

So, for the remainder of our time this morning, we are not going to focus on the counterfeit, but on Solomon's descriptions of a true friend.

The first thing we'll note is that a true friend is not a fair-weather friend. You've heard the saying, *"He's a good man in a storm"*? A true friend is a friend in time of need, when the storms of life hit. He, she is a foul-weather friend.

### True Friends...

#### ...Give the Gift of PRESENCE

*[17:17] A friend loves at all times,  
And a brother is born for adversity.*

and (one we just saw)

*[18:24] A man of many friends comes to ruin,  
But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.<sup>6</sup>*

These two proverbs affirm what we all know: When times are tough, we need a Velcro friend.<sup>7</sup>

- "Brother-friends" (or "sister-friends") are the ones you want standing next to you at the graveside when a loved one has died.
- They are the ones who will be with you in the hospital.
- They are the ones who will help you pick up the pieces of your life after a business failure, after a personal tragedy, after a moral blowout.

When it seems that all the world is against you, the friend *"who sticks closer than a brother"* is right beside you.

The second characteristic of the friendship for which we all hunger is honesty. Hear for the second time the words of Proverbs 27:6.

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<sup>6</sup> See also 14:20; 19:4,6,7

<sup>7</sup> Solomon is of a mind that there is no better picture of a deep relationship than that which should exist between brothers. That is why David, Solomon's father, referred to Jonathan, his closest friend, as his *"brother"* in 2 Samuel 1:26.

### ...Are (sometimes brutally) HONEST

*[27:6] Faithful are the wounds of a friend,  
But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.*

Every day, at hospitals all around our city, surgeons take knives and slice open the bodies of their patients. They spill blood on purpose.

They know full well that the cuts they make will cause pain. But, to promote overall health, they hack away at their patient's bodies.

A true friend is willing to be a soul surgeon. You won't hear empty flattery from a friend. You will get unvarnished truth. Your friend will tear into you. But his wounds are better than the insincere embrace of an enemy.

True friendship requires the courage to lance the boil of a friend's toxic, angry outbursts with an honest, well-timed rebuke. She loves you so much that she's willing to cause pain and risk possible rejection when she wields a verbal scalpel and tells you the hard truth.

There are some of you here who have told me what I have needed to hear rather than what I would have liked to hear - and I am forever in your debt.

You've pulled me aside when I've spoken rashly. You've asked me about my decisions (as in, "*Really Dave?*"). You've asked me to defend my positions on theology.

I'm a better man for having had friends willing to speak the truth in love. YOU, too, want a friend or two or three in your life like that.

So, a true friend is concerned that his friend deals with truth. One verse from among many we could choose highlights this aspect of friendship so clearly that I want to mention it here.

### ...Provide Loving and Wise COUNSEL

*[27:9] Oil and perfume make the heart glad,  
So a man's counsel is sweet to his friend.*

A century and a half ago, the western world witnessed the birth of professional counseling. In recent decades, there has also developed a whole branch of counseling that is solidly Christ-centered and Scriptural. I praise God for that development!

We all applaud the efforts of men and women who work hard to wisely apply Scripture's truths to serious personal issues. And I firmly believe that there is an important place for the trained, professional counselor in our world today.

However, as much as I thank God for many of the skilled professional counselors I know, Solomon speaks of the therapeutic effect of a friend in the life of his friend.

The sincere counsel of a friend - in whatever form it might take: encouragement, exhortation, rebuke, advice - is like sweet perfume. Its effect lingers long after the remark is made.

Why? Because the words of our friends are sourced in love. Our friends know us. We know that they care for us.<sup>8</sup>

If you are going to be that kind of a friend, you are going to have to eventually take the risk of talking about things other than the weather and the Spurs and public policy and politics and you're going to have to learn to ask open-ended questions. Probe. Pry. Snoop. Open Pandora's Box.

You'll need to be willing to approach your friend with questions that explore her soul and that will expose motivation. You'll need to go to a place that might uncover a raw nerve.

- "*Hey, I was so happy to hear about your promotion at work recently! How did that victory impact your spiritual energy? Your dependence on God?*"
- "*I was so sad to hear the news about your last check-up/your teenage child's recent choice/the loss of your job. Tell me. How have you met God in your pain?*"

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<sup>8</sup> There are lots of studies that bear out that so-called "lay counselors" and "peer counselors" often do a better, more credible job of counseling than the paid professionals.

- “Talk to me about your most important relationships, OK? How’s your marriage? How are you with your kids? How are you doing with your neighbors? What emotions are you experiencing as you deal with them and think about them? Are you loving them well? Is your love reciprocated? No? Well how are you dealing with that?”

If you would be a friend who lives out Proverbs 27:9, one whose counsel to your friend is like sweet perfume, you will go below the surface, probe fearlessly into your friend’s soul, and point him or her to Jesus in the midst of life’s challenges.

Solomon says that in a genuine friendship there is:

- **PRESENCE:** Consistent support - especially in the tough times.
- **HONESTY:** Truth-telling, no holds barred.
- **COUNSEL:** Thoughtful input that leads to insight.

That’s the kind of friendship for which God made us.

So...

Do you have these friendships in your life? You do? Great! If you don’t, and if you’re hungering for them, I’ve got good news today. It is possible to develop these friendships.

In the time remaining, and thanks to Solomon’s wisdom, I want to highlight one out-of-this-world benefit to soul-to-soul friendship AND list a few of the costs involved in cultivating them.

The first cost of friendship may sound funny, but it’s true. Friendship requires space!

### **Friendship’s Cost/Benefit Analysis**

#### **Friendship’s Costs**

*Friendship costs SPACE (25:17)*

**[25:17] Let your foot rarely be in your neighbor’s<sup>9</sup> house, Or he will become weary of you and hate you.**

At first blush it looks like Solomon is giving “Miss Manners” style pointers on protocol. And sure, it is not a good idea to go over to your friend’s house too frequently or to stay too long. But the real point here is that true friendship must be held with a loose hand.

Friendships are the gift of God. The “friend” who demands time and attention is treating friendship as an inalienable right. Genuine friendship is a precious and a fragile thing.

How many friendships (maybe YOUR friendships?) have been ruined by demandingness, or by one friend putting the other in a position of obligation? Wisdom doesn’t demand from a friend.

Here’s another cost we’ll be willing to pay to have a genuine friendship. Sensitivity.

This proverb conjures up a pretty graphic mental image.

*Friendship costs SENSITIVITY (27:14)*

**[27:14] He who blesses his friend with a loud voice early in the morning, It will be reckoned a curse to him.**

Ok. So you are a morning person. Your friend is not! She shows up for work, but barely. Her body is there, but her mind, spirit, and soul are still in the car, deciding whether to come inside.

You bounce into her office with a loud, boisterous, jovial greeting and a quick practical joke at the coffee machine.

Quick. How will your greeting impact your friend? More than likely, she’ll be irritated and resentful.

This proverb brings a profound lesson for all of us who would be friends. Specifically, we are to choose for our expressions those that will most effectively meet the need of our friend.

A person of wisdom will respond to the sad face differently than to the happy face.

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<sup>9</sup> Literally, “*friend’s*”.

If, because of an experience your friend has just had, the expression that best meets his need is calm and tranquility, then you will tailor your expression to meet that need - even though you are ecstatic about something that's occurred in your own life.

If your friend has just received wonderful news and greets you with that news, then even though you may be in emotional turmoil about some issue you're facing, your commitment to bless your friend will override your own angst and you'll rejoice with them!

You'll rejoice with those who rejoice and will weep with those who weep (Romans 12).

Now here's a tough one. This is one that may find some resistance. Solomon says that if we are wise we will put the brakes on a certain kind of humor. Listen carefully.

*Friendship costs KINDNESS (26:18, 19)*

**[26:18] Like a madman who throw**

**Firebrands, arrows, and death,**

**[19] So is the man who deceives his neighbor** (or "friend")

**And says, "Was I not joking?"**

Not much needs to be said here, does it? Sarcasm can be fun. But how many times has joking around wounded a friend and killed a friendship?

Cutting and "funny" remarks about a person's looks, their lacks, or their luck wound deeply. And the wounds don't go away when we say, "*I was just kidding!*"

I want to look at one final cost of friendship today. Proverbs says so much about it that we dare not pass it by.

Over time, a good friendship will not only be marked by much good conversation verbal kindnesses and sweet counsel. It will also be marked by strategic and well-placed silences.

*Friendship costs SILENCE*

Silence is golden when a friend has suffered great loss

**[10:19] Where there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, But he who restrains his lips is wise.<sup>10</sup>**

When your friend is exhausted or tense or depressed or angry or grieving, it is possible that your greatest gift to them might be the sound of silence. More often than we would ever dream, it is just fine to have nothing to say.

Remember the book of Job? Job had three friends with him who came to comfort him in his intense pain and sorrow. For seven days they were wonderful comforters. They didn't say a word. When they spoke, everything went south.

Silence is golden when your friend is hurting. And silence is golden when your friend trusts you with a secret.

Silence is golden when there is a confidence to be kept

**[11:13] He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets, But he who is trustworthy conceals a matter.**

Knowledge is power. And if you become a friend to someone - as we have seen friendship described in Proverbs this morning - you will accumulate enough knowledge about your friend to sink him.

Over time, she has come to trust you with her secrets. You hold her life in your hands. Don't violate that trust! If you want to be a friend, you keep a confidence.

Gossip, sugar-coated as a prayer request, is still gossip. And the relational effect of gossip equals the effect of the most vicious cancer.

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<sup>10</sup> The most therapeutic gift I received at my mother's funeral (I remember this gift from 1980 like it was yesterday) was an embrace, followed by a five second eyeball to eyeball loving stare from a friend who didn't utter a word as the tears streamed down his face. I don't remember a single word said to me by anyone from that day.

It is death. Death to reputations, death to unity, death to friendships.

Pay the costs of friendship - space, sensitivity, kindness, silence - and over time, you will reap the benefits of friendship.

Proverbs would tell us that there are lots of benefits to friendship. You get a relationship where there is presence, loving honesty, and wise counsel. There will be a pressure-free lack of demandingness, kindness, and silence when necessary.

And there is one more benefit that I'll mention today.

Solomon says that deeper than surface-level friendship will cause you to grow. It will mature you. Or, as one proverb puts it, you get sharpened!

### **One of Friendship's (many, many!) Benefits**

***[27:17] Iron sharpens iron,  
So one man sharpens another.***

Sharpening occurs when two hard objects strike each other. When iron meets iron, sparks fly. Sometimes the friction caused by the clash generates heat.

True, when genuine friends interact, it may not always be "nice" and comfortable. But in that honest exchange both friends will grow.

The Lord who calls us His friends (John 15:15) is pleased to use our friendships with each other to shape us and mold us into His image.

### **Conclusion:**

All those who preach reach for more than we grasp. Some more than others. I more than most.

When I bring a message to you, I'm always convinced of the truth of the Scriptures and am usually pretty settled that what I'm saying reflects that truth.

That was true when we went through Romans. It's true today.

But I'll also be the first to admit that while I think everything I've said today is true, I have not always lived out what Solomon says about the wisdom of friendships as I wish I had.

One of the things that happens in a church where the pastor hangs around for a long time (as I have) is that lots of people in the church end up knowing the pastor pretty well.

You know my strengths and weaknesses. You know my faults and foibles and have seen me fail. And you know that I'm far from perfect when it comes to friendships.

This week has been a week of some honest reflection on my part and I've had to admit to violating most of the counsel I've given in the message that I've just delivered.

And you might be willing to say that you have a long way to go when it comes to being a friend, too.

Well, friends, here's a very hopeful proverb for all of us who have yet to "arrive."

***[Proverbs 24:16] For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again,  
But the wicked stumble in time of calamity.***

God gives us a lifetime of opportunities to stumble, get up by His grace, and walk again. I look forward to walking the path of friendship, even with stumbles along the way, with you.