

## Friends are Influential

Foolproof

Various Proverbs

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I am not sure if this is the case for you, but there are certain people who make me feel so insecure when I am around them. One of those types of people are those who make very complicated things seem simple. These are the students who are able to do the Rubik's Cube with one hand, engineers who see a problem and solution in a whole different way, finance people whose conversations just make your head hurt. Honestly, I enjoy finances. I feel very confident in talking budgets, stocks, investments, etc., but there are times when I am meeting with our Director of Finance Brian Davis and our Executive Pastor of Operations Bruce Smith when I feel like I am at a Star Trek convention and I've never watched a single episode. It's an entirely different language. They are able to see really complex things in a simple way. And to be clear, I am so glad these people exist. Society depends on these people. We need people that can make complex things simple.

We all know friendship are important. That's clear. C.S Lewis says, "Friendship is the greatest of worldly goods. Certainly to me it is the chief to happiness of life."<sup>1</sup> Yet, you might be someone looking at the people around you with in shame because it seems like they make friendships seem simple, yet for you they are complex. Many of us struggle with constant anxiety about our friendships—who we should be friends with, how many friends we don't have, and the depth or shallowness of our relationships.

For some of you, this doesn't resonate at all. For you, friendships are so easy. "Zach, I'm friends with everyone! It is so easy!" For you, it might be the case that you need more complexity in your friendships.

My hope this morning is to pull out themes the book of Proverbs teaches about friendship. I think the wisdom of Proverbs teaches us three primary things about friendship: **avoid foolish friends, find honest friends, and cultivate enduring friends.**

It is important for us to remind ourselves what the proverbs are. These are not promises for the Christian life. Meaning, if you do these things, you will not always get the result the text states. That is an over-application and an unhelpful use of these texts. Rather, Solomon is offering principles for human flourishes that are written within the context of all of Scripture.

### Avoid Foolish Friends

Avoid foolish friends. Most of us know this to be true. We know bad friends affect us. We teach our kids this. Bad friends are bad decisions. But we may underestimate the influence that our friends have.

My friend Jim Cofield says something that is instrumental for us to understand about friendship. He says, "We are *made by* and *for* relationships." I believe that's what the book of Proverbs is teaching us.

Look at 13:20:

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume 2: Books, Broadcasts, and the War, 1931-1949

*Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise,  
but the companion of fools will suffer harm (Prov. 13:20).*

There is a direct connection between the friends you choose and your flourishing. If you surround yourself with fools, you will suffer.

There is a lie we have come to believe that we are self-made and autonomous. We aren't! Our minds and souls are permeable. Meaning we are constantly consuming the voices and lifestyles around us. The people and voices that we have around us substantially affect us. These relationships lead to harm. They also lead to bad morals. Look at 22:24-25:

*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 (Prov. 22:24-25).*

You know this is true! We are conforming creatures. We conform to what we are constantly around. Therefore, if you find yourself around immoral people, you will likely become an immoral person. If you are often around an angry person, you conform to their anger. If it's slander or gossip, you will find yourself a slanderer or gossip.

As a Student Ministries pastor, I've seen this too many times, especially as students go to college. Rarely do students go to college with intentions to become bad people. What happens is that students are surrounded by friends who are fools and they do foolish things. That is why the first week of college is so important. The friends they make that first week will be influential in their college experience. Because foolish friends make us fools. Young man or young lady headed to college, you need to hear this from your pastor: Just because they look good doesn't mean they are good for you. Don't get sucked into an emotionally dependent relationship because they are attractive and make you feel good. If they are foolish, they are no good for you! Run away.

Because here is what happens. Check out Proverbs 25:19:

*Trusting in a treacherous man in time of trouble  
is like a bad tooth or a foot that slips (Prov. 25:19).*

When you surround yourself with foolish friends and then you need faithful friends, you find yourself with people you can't depend on. Most times, foolish friends are in it for the good times but absent when you are suffering. Faithful friends are present during your joys *and* your struggles. Faithful friends are dependable for life.

Let me be very clear. Avoiding foolish friends doesn't mean avoiding foolish people. God has not called us to isolation. You ought to have relationships with people who don't share your beliefs, your morals, or your way of life. We are called to be a light in the world, not a recluse in a Christian bubble. Jesus says in John 17:15, "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one." Sure, our deepest friendships, our influential friendships should not be with fools. Yet, by God's common grace, we can laugh, joke, cry, and share a meal with people the Bible would call foolish.

Also, we must remember God is the redeemer of fools. Our foolishness, which is ample, and our foolish friends don't have the final word on our life. God has the final word on our life. Let's be honest, we *all* have foolish friends, and we have all been a foolish friend. Thanks be to God that he is the savior of fools. Your mistakes don't define you. Your past relationships don't define you. Your broken marriage doesn't define you. Your wounds from your childhood don't define you. If you have put your faith in Jesus, Christ has redeemed you. Yes, there are wounds and there are scars. Jesus's blood doesn't make the pain go away, but he does promise that your story is not in vain. He is working that mistake for his glory and your good.

Maybe you are watching this morning and you have found yourself in a turbulent circle of relationships. You know they are bad for you, but you have a void in your life and those relationships seem to scratch that itch, yet they are unsatisfying. Now you live in shame, knowing the mistakes you've made.

There is a story in the Bible for you. Jesus, in the Gospel of John chapter 4, meets a woman at the well. He asks this woman for a drink of water, and it takes the woman aback. He then tells her to call her husband. She tells him she doesn't have a husband. Jesus informs her that he knows she's had multiple husbands and the man she is living with now is not her husband. Jesus knows the shame this woman experiences because of her relationship mistakes. He doesn't gloss over them or act like they don't exist. He looks at her wounds and mistakes and says, "I see those. I know exactly who you are. I know about the divorces. I know about the unfaithfulness. Yet I am inviting you to life with me anyway." The woman goes to the crowds and says to them, "Come meet the man who told me all of my sins!" (v. 29). How profound!

Jesus looks to you today and says, "I see you. I know about your mistakes. I know how foolish you have been, and I want you." You can experience that freedom of God's grace today by turning from yourself and your shame and making Jesus reign as King of your life.

Avoid foolish friends... Secondly,

### **Find Honest Friends**

The goal of friendship isn't simply to avoid others' foolishness, but to avoid our own. For us to be able to avoid our own foolishness, we must have people we can be honest with us. If we have friends who just let us know what we want to hear, then we will be led into our own demise.

Listen to Proverbs 12:26:

*One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor,  
but the way of the wicked leads them astray (Prov. 12:26).*

Honest friends are guides to a flourishing life. Foolish friends have no intention to help us be more like Jesus. Foolish friends just seek what we can offer them. Honest friends are like lights toward a path of godliness. Foolish friends are confusing and distracting. You know this! The Proverbs are so experientially true! You have friends that you know are *no good* for you. When you hang out with that group of people, you become a different person and you walk away with a foolish odor. On top of that, you know they constantly lie and betray you. They talk behind your back and let you down. You can hardly know when they are telling you the truth or not.

Do you have friends like Proverbs 20:19 describes?

*Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets;  
therefore do not associate with a simple babbling (Prov. 20:19).*

We have friends who are constantly talking about other people. They start conversations with “Have you heard...” You let them continue because you don’t want to create an awkward moment, but you know it’s wrong. Christian, gossip and slander are foolish and sinful. They are not the way of Jesus.

Here is a Zach-ian proverb (non-biblical) that I tend to hold to: if someone constantly talks about others when they are around you, then they are most likely talking about you when they are around others.

These friendships don’t help us follow Jesus, and they do not show off the love of Jesus to the world. That awkward moment when you have to stop the conversation in the middle is worth it for the sake of the gospel.

Be the type of friend who is willing to be honest with someone. We need friends who tell us the truth. The problem is that truth hurts. I don’t enjoy when someone calls me out. Life is much more enjoyable when everyone tells me what I want to hear. We need these Proverbs as reminders:

*Better is open rebuke  
than hidden love (Prov. 27:5).*

*Faithful are the wounds of a friend;  
profuse are the kisses of an enemy (Prov. 27:6).*

*Iron sharpens iron,  
and one man sharpens another (Prov. 27:17).*

We need to surround ourselves with people who are going to tell us what we need to hear and not what we want to hear. Often, I find myself around young dating couples, and they say things like “We never fight. It’s great.” I just smile. I smile because they don’t fight because they haven’t entered into the parts of the relationship where they are willing to be honest with one another. I want to say, “Sis, soon he is going to disagree with you about where y’all should eat dinner.”

I spent several years playing football, and during our summer camps, there would always be one or two fights. As a player and later on coaching staffs, I would get worried when there aren’t any fights. Fights often meant that the players cared. They didn’t want to lose. They had a conviction that the person over the line from them wasn’t going to beat them.

This may sound strange, but fighting needs to happen in your friendships. I am not saying you need to consistently be fighting. If that’s the case, I’d encourage you to examine your relationship or seek out people to help you. But fighting means that you care. Fighting means that someone is being honest and honesty hurts.

My friend and co-worker Karesse Warren, who is an amazing gift to our student ministry, says it like this, “You need people in your life who have permission to wound you.” Is that true?

Do you have those people? Do you have friends who can have permission to tell you like it is? Maybe that starts by having people in your life who don’t totally agree with you. You need disagreeable people in your life. If all your friends think the same way, vote the same way, eat the same food, live in the same places, and have

the same hobbies, are you actually allowing people into your life who can change your status quo? It may be the case that you don't want friends to help conform you to Jesus but to help you continue living the same way. That is why the church is so beautiful.

Listen, I know I am a fool. If I didn't have people in my life telling me I'm wrong, then there is no telling where I'd be. There will be crowns in heaven for my wife who helped me avoid foolish decisions. My team here at church has been given full permission to say things like "Zach, that idea, while well intended, is one of the dumbest ideas I've ever heard." And they utilize that permission often...

Have you given people in your life permission to tell you the truth? Do they feel safe with confronting you? If not, I encourage you to find those friends today.

Avoid foolish friends, find honest friends, and lastly...

### **Cultivate Enduring Friends**

Friends aren't just essential for our wisdom and morality, but for our endurance. We cannot survive this life without faithful friends.

Solomon says,

*A friend loves at all times,  
and a brother is born for adversity (Prov. 17:17).*

We need deep friends who help us through our adversity and trouble. We need friends for our foolish times. We need friends for our hard times, and we need friends for our joyful times. We need friends who will visit us at the funeral home and at the hospital when our child is born.

The issue is that many people have a lot of friends, yet no close friendships. Solomon warns of this:

*A man of many companions may come to ruin,  
but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother (Prov. 18:24).*

You may be watching and think "I have no trouble with friends. I have plenty!" And you may have plenty but have no deep, personal friendships. I hope this diagram helps you categorize your friendships.

<b>Intimate Friendships</b>	<b>Proximate Friendships</b>	<b>Utility Friendships</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Covenantal in nature</li> <li>• Knows your struggles and joys</li> <li>• Knows how to interpret and translate you</li> <li>• They have permission to hurt you</li> <li>• Requires trust in vulnerability</li> <li>• Ex: spouse, child, pastor, Small Group member, accountability partner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Circumstantial in nature</li> <li>• Understands how to serve you</li> <li>• Knows your story</li> <li>• Is able to weep with you and rejoice with you</li> <li>• Requires trust in personality</li> <li>• Ex: neighbor, church member, distant family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contractual in nature</li> <li>• Knows who you are</li> <li>• Is familiar with your interests</li> <li>• Needed for economic and physical flourishing</li> <li>• Requires trust in responsibilities</li> <li>• Ex: co-worker, accountant, coach, teacher, student</li> </ul>

Don't overthink these categories. There are blurry lines between these groups, not clean ones. But I think this will help us take inventory of our friendships and who we are really friends with.

We must also come to grip with our ability for deep friendships. Some of us, because of things we've experienced in our lives, are more or less able to have intimate friendships. If you've been wounded by intimate relationships with family or a spouse, then your ability to have deep friends may be hindered because the people who you have loved the most have hurt you the most. You may guard yourself from friendships because of how you've been hurt in the past. I want to say to you—God sees that wound. God sees that pain.

For others, we must be sensitive to people's abilities for friendships. Our souls can only handle so many intimate friendships and you may have a higher capacity than the person you have expectations of. That's unfair. If we don't understand this, we will become bitter and jealous of the friendships that we wish we had.

Friends, we need multiple friends, but we also need intimate friends. These are the friends who get us through the night. My friend Karesse helps out again as she has constantly told our students and team, "Friendships require us to really be known." Being known is scary. I don't want someone to know my flaws. I don't want people to see my wounds and weaknesses. I don't want people to see that maybe I am not the best husband or father. Maybe I don't read my Bible as much as people think I do. That's too vulnerable. Yet, that's exactly what God has called us to because we can't stay faithful without it.

We know dark days will hit. We know we will get that news from the doctor. We might lose that job. We might go into a depression. Brokenness will not wait for us to have friends. On that day when you feel like you're walking through a dark room, friends are the walls your hands find to get to the other side. Without enduring friends, we are walking through a minefield with a blindfold on.

J.R.R Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* saga mostly around the theme of friendship. If you watch the movies or read the books, you'll see honest and enduring friendships. One of my favorite scenes is at the end of the first book when Frodo is seeking to go to Mordor on his own and Sam sees him and jumps in the water to reach Frodo's boat, even though he couldn't swim. Frodo gets him out of the water and here is how the scene goes:

*"It would be the death of you to come with me, Sam," said Frodo, "and I could not have borne that."*

*"Not as certain as being left behind," said Sam.*

*"But I am going to Mordor"*

*"I know that well enough, Mr. Frodo. Of course you are. And I'm going with you."*

*"Now, Sam," said Frodo, "don't hinder me! The others will be coming back at any minute. If they catch me here, I shall have to argue and explain, and I shall never have the heart or change to get off. But I must go at once, it's the only way."*

*"Of course it is," answers Sam, "but not alone. I'm coming too, or neither of us is going."<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring, by J. R. R. Tolkien, Balantine Books, 1973, pp. 255–256.

That is the type of friendship Proverbs is speaking about. It's the friendship that knows things are going to be hard. It will be inconvenient. It will cost money. It may cost your reputation at some point. It may be uncomfortable. But it will be worth it. When we see Jesus, we can look at one other thankful to God that we helped each other make it to the finish line together.

### **Jesus, Our Faithful Friend**

This is the type of friendship Jesus modeled and provided for us. In the Gospel of John, we read:

*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 (John 15:13-15).*

Do you know Jesus calls you his friend? Do you know that Jesus loves you more than any other being is able to love you?

Before we ever did anything for him, he died for us.

Knowing we would fail him, he died for us.

Knowing we wouldn't talk to him as much as we should, he calls us friend.

Knowing we don't read his Word as much as we should, he loves us.

Knowing we don't love each other as much as we should, he calls us his.

Knowing we probably deserve the mess we are in, he doesn't leave us in it.

Friends, if we knew someone that loved others like Jesus loves us, we would call them foolish. They give too much time. They give too many resources, and the others don't even love them back. That's what makes Jesus's love so remarkable.

Church, there is no friendless Christianity. God has called us toward friendship. With God's help, let us avoid foolish friends who mean us no good. Let us find honest friends who will tell us what we don't want to hear, and let us cultivate enduring friends who will help us finish the race.

**Prayer** | *Jesus, we give you glory for the scandalous grace you have provided in your friendship. We could not have life with God outside of your friendship. Grant us repentance in areas in which we have failed our friends. Forgive us for ejecting on friendships that we shouldn't have. Provide peace to homes, to siblings, to church members so they can be reconciled. Lord, give us deep friendships so that we might endure until we meet you. We ask this in your beautiful name. Amen.*