

Friendship in Proverbs

In his book called “Bowling Alone”, Robert Putnam writes about the need for increased civic engagement and more significant interpersonal connection. He tells the story of friends John Lambert and Andy Boschma.

Before October 29, 1997, John Lambert and Andy Boschma knew each other only through their local bowling league at the Ypsi-Arbor Lanes in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Lambert, a sixty-four-year-old retired employee of the University of Michigan hospital, had been on a kidney transplant waiting list for three years when Boschma, a thirty-three-year-old accountant, learned casually of Lambert's need and unexpectedly approached him to offer to donate one of his own kidneys.

"Andy saw something in me that others didn't," said Lambert. "When we were in the hospital Andy said to me, 'John, I really like you and have a lot of respect for you. I wouldn't hesitate to do this all over again.' I got choked up." [Lambert said] Boschma returned the feeling: "I obviously feel a kinship [with Lambert]. I cared about him before, but now I'm really rooting for him."

What Putnam rightly observed is that the heartfelt story displays the simple power of a friendship developed at a bowling league to overcome what he describes as the typical divisions of age and race. And he goes on to say, in small ways like this — and in larger ways, too — we Americans need to reconnect with one another.

In my life personally, friendships have challenged my weaknesses, corrected misperceptions, provided examples of selflessness, lightened burdens, increased joys, and on some special occasions been the conduits of experiencing God's grace and presence.

Friendship always feels like a difficult topic to address with adults. Proverbs has a great deal to say about it, that is for certain. But here in our context I find that the very idea of friendship among adults is not a pleasant topic at all. Most people seem to feel like they have few real friends, and the pace of life does not seem to lend to solving the problem any time soon.

For this reason I believe a lot of people are tempted to settle for unsatisfying levels of friendship and through a variety of reasons have determined never to take the risk of working for something more. But we need friendship. If we are going to change, and come to see and know the goodness and glory of God, we must have friends that help us see life in ways we will never see for ourselves.

I cannot find you any friends, but as I studied through Proverbs I was surprised how often the topic of friendship came up. So according to Proverbs, **What will cause our friendships to flourish rather than deteriorate?**

1. Our friendships Flourish when we show up in difficulty. Friendship is strengthened when we show up in difficult times.

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

Whether we understand it or not, we were made to be people who do not walk alone. In this Proverb we have a traditional form of Hebrew Poetry where the second line of the poetry repeats and extends the same idea. The proverb is using the idea of brotherly affection to fill out our meaning of friendship. A friend is the type of person that feels the loyalty we must often expect of those who are family by blood.

In fact we see the power of the idea a chapter later when we read in Proverbs 18:24...
A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. (Proverbs 18:24 ESV)

The Proverb helps us to understand that real friendship becomes like a safety net for a person. Whereas 'companions' or acquaintances are generally untouched by one another's difficulties. A friend feels it personally and sticks close by through all sorts of situations. It is a gift we give to others in friendship.

2. Our friendships Flourish when we take time to understand. Friendship is strengthened when our insider knowledge results in genuine counsel.

C.S. Lewis rightly observes in his book the Four Loves, which has a brilliant chapter on friendship. That "Friendship arises out of mere Companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one." -C.S. Lewis

Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel. (Proverbs 27:9 ESV).

Here the writer of Proverbs gives us some insight into what makes a friend particular sweet to the soul. It's their ability to speak into our life in a way that reminds us that they know and understand who we are. There is a difference between generally good advice and the sort of "sincere", "heartfelt" words depicted here that can get past the external circumstances and communicate with the soul. And it doesn't have to be deep, it just has to be right.

For example, when we were living in Iceland several years ago, we were in an extended time of uncertainty about whether we would be granted long term visa and be able to stay. Life got stressful, we went through a miscarriage, were tired from language learning, and the stress of our situation was compounding. A friend of mine could sense I was struggling with it even from a distance and contacted me. He had one piece of advice. He said, I am pretty sure you haven't been running, you are stressed, you need to go for a run today. The truth is he knew things about how I am wired. He had paid attention and he was right.. "The sweetness of a friend comes from His earnest counsel."

The only way to become that sort of friends is to become less self-interested in our conversations and become the kind of person who is in conversations to serve and understand the person we are talking to.

3. Our friendships Flourish through beneficial honesty. Friendship is strengthened when we speak difficult words for one another's good.

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

Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another. (Proverbs 27:17 ESV)

No friendship emerges from surface level niceties. And they do not flourish where there isn't the sort of risk-taking that speaks a good word in season.

Oscar Wilde's words on friendship come to mind here. He rightly quipped "***A friend is someone who stabs you in the front.***"

A person usually has few friends when they do not create an environment around themselves where people can be honest with them. If you are defensive, biting, or angry when someone is honest with you, then Friendships will not flourish in your life.

Do you want the friendship in your marriage to flourish? Create an environment that isn't so defensive. Value candid answers ruthlessly. Make it ok to disagree with you. Before long you will be able to hear what your spouse is really saying. In your friendships you will begin to discover what those around you actually think and feel.

Maybe today someone might come to mind who is a friend, and you have distanced yourself from them because they told you some difficult truth. At the time you were just mad, but now with some space, you see the value of what they had to say and need to reach out to them and express your appreciation.

4. Our friendships Flourish when we avoid duplicity. Friendship is destroyed by speaking differently behind someone's back than when you are in front of them.

A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends. (Proverbs 16:28 ESV)

Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends. (Proverbs 17:9 ESV)

The wisdom of these Proverbs need little explanation. Ultimately duplicity breaks the trust needed to comfortably let people on the inside of your life. If we are not trustworthy we undermine the fabrics of friendship and create isolation and a guarded environment in which friendship can never flourish.

5. Our friendships Flourish when they are built on sincerity. Friendship has imitators, so be careful.

The poor is disliked even by his neighbor, but the rich has many friends. (Proverbs 14:20 ESV)

Many seek the favor of a generous man, and everyone is a friend to a man who gives gifts. (Proverbs 19:6 ESV).

Not every association that we have in life is an expression of friendship. Friendships will flourish in our lives when we seek them and give them with sincerity. If we are pursuing certain friendships with ulterior motives referred to in the Proverbs above, we should not be surprised when they lack depth and fizzle out. Wisdom will compel us to give sincerity to our relationships and plant the seeds of friendship in truthful motivations.

Look to Christ - Good friendships are a rare jewel in life. We do have a real hunger for them. We are people who want to know and be known. As Christians we know that we are created in the Image of God so it is no surprise that the word of God tells us that God is a God of friendship.

It is almost surprising for us to see in Genesis 18 that the Lord called Abraham into a relationship and spoke to him like person speaks to a friend. The Lord sits with Abraham and tell Him his plans, like a friend rather than a servant. It is an event that James later describes the significance of when He writes in James 2:23 that Abraham was called a friend of God.

But this relationship of friendship was never just intended for Abraham. Jesus uses the pattern of God's friendship with Abraham to help us to understand the powerful essence of friendship when he says to His disciples:

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 ESV)

Jesus purposely calls his disciples...friends. He shows up in difficulty. He understands us perfectly. He speaks with undeniable honesty. And calls us into friendship with sincerity.

By doing so He counters the one powerful lie that we all face. The lie that if we are deeply known we cannot be deeply loved. God Himself who knows you to the depths of your darkest secret and broken thoughts, demonstrates that real love which is the fuel of friendship is given on the basis of grace. When we were undeserving he poured out His love in Jesus.

One of the most powerful images of this grace is that after Jesus drew his disciples together for the last supper and washed their feet, he told them again of the coming suffering of the cross. Like a friend he was letting them inside his plans. He promised through the meal that he would make a new covenant in his blood to reconcile them to God. Then when he went out to the garden and as he was arrested, they all fled. Yet he died for them, and for us anyway.

It's a picture of His unending love for us. Love that would not only die, but then after the betrayal seeks out the friend that denied he even knew Him and restores him with a new hope for the future. That is the gospel story of God's friendship expressed. He takes his enemies and gathers them around His table, not as servants but through faith in Christ we become friends.