

## Proverbs: The Friend

Well we've been studying Proverbs for the last couple of weeks and if you've been here then I hope you've been struck as I have by how relevant they are modern life. This is full of the kind of wisdom you and I need in order to live our practical day to day lives.

And in fact that's exactly what the book of Proverbs says about itself. So just turn with me to Chapter 1 – to the preface of the book of Proverbs. We haven't really looked at it yet but let's just have a quick look at it just now: Proverbs 1:1-7.

And these opening verses explain to us why we need to read this book. Why is the book of Proverbs in the Bible?

Well to give us...

### Wisdom for our minds and our lives.

Look at verses 1-3

<sup>1</sup> The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

<sup>2</sup> for attaining wisdom and discipline;  
for understanding words of insight;

<sup>3</sup> for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life,  
doing what is right and just and fair;

So these Proverbs are intended to give us wisdom and discipline – in other words they show us the kind of things we need to know about life in order to live it wisely. But do you see how wisdom begins with the understanding – v2 they are **for understanding words of insight**; in other words these Proverbs are for our minds – they're there to help us grow in understanding. Which gives us a hint as to how to read the Proverbs. Proverbs aren't little laws that always hold true. You can't take a proverb and expect it always to hold true. Proverbs are descriptions of life as it normally is, a proverb is a generalization. So for example we say 'Too many cooks spoil the broth' – and sure – we know what it means and we know it's true even if it doesn't quite apply to the kitchen of a restaurant where there might be any number of excellent cooks producing excellent broth! But you'd miss the wisdom in a proverb if you pointed out the exceptions all the time.

So you can't take a proverb and just mechanically apply it to every situation. Solomon intended his Proverbs to be things which will change our understanding. SO you're supposed to take a proverb and chew on it, think about it, turn it over in your mind for a while and relate it to your own situation.

- And in that way a proverb might highlight something you hadn't noticed about life or about yourself before now – and so you're understanding improves.
- or it might put into words something which you've experienced in life but not quite been able to put your finger on or express – and in that way your understanding improves
- or it might help you to see why things have gone wrong – why it is for example, to take tonight's topic, that a friendship has gone sour – and in that way your understanding improves.

But then do you see where wisdom is to lead – it's not just remain in our minds in our understanding, v3, its **for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life**, in other words the

point is to learn how to live well, to learn how to treat people in a **right and just and fair** way. Why is the book of Proverbs in the Bible? It's to give us wisdom for our minds and our lives. And a wise mind produces a wise life. But proverbs also provides...

### **Wisdom for the simple and the wise.**

So verse 4 **for giving prudence to the simple**, and by simple it doesn't mean weak minded it means someone who is untaught or immature. Which usually means someone who is young – either young in years or young in the faith – that's why he says **for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young** – someone who just hasn't had time yet to grow in wisdom. Proverbs act as a kind of inside track to wisdom – a fast track to becoming wise. Don't go for those silly little books of wisdom, or the little book of calm – those books you find on shop counters, don't turn to the advice column or the agony aunt – turn to the book of Proverbs – because it's there to help the young person become wise beyond years. The Proverbs are a little text book on how to do life. So if you're young this book is particularly for you. And I would particularly recommend this book by Bill Hybels which explains and helps you to apply the proverbs. It's available from the bookstall at the back for you as well.

But the book of Proverbs is also for the wise <sup>5</sup> **let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance** – Because of course the truly wise person knows that he doesn't know everything. The wise person is keen to be wiser still. The wise person keeps her L-plates on at all times. And so if you're wise, I particularly want to recommend this book by Bill Hybels to you which explains and helps you to apply the proverbs. It's available from the bookstall at the back for you as well. But then there's one last crucial thing, because Proverbs provides

### **Wisdom for the Christian**

Verse 7 <sup>7</sup> **The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.** In other words Solomon is warning us there's no point reading and digesting these proverbs if you're not prepared to fear the Lord, to put him first in your life. It's only as we get to know our God, and learn his ways, and allow him to change us, only then will these Proverbs be of any real use to us. <sup>7</sup> **The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge** – in other words the beginning of wisdom is to turn to Christ – wisdom is for the Christian.

So let's turn to the Proverbs for wisdom, and tonight we're going to think about how to be a wise friend. So the questions this evening are these kinds of questions: are you a good friend? What kind of friend are you? What kind of friends have you got? How will we recognise when someone is a true friend. Well I think the Proverbs will help us. And I've got 4 headings.

The first mark of a good friend is that he's

#### **1. Faithful enough always to help you out.**

A friend in need is a friend indeed. That's what we say, and when we say it we're agreeing with the Proverbs, because Chapter 17:17 speaks of that kind of constant friend, some one who is always there for you, 17:17 - **A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.**

It's in times of trouble isn't it that we realise what family ties are for. I know that some of us will have had or might be having bad family experiences. But in general, a brother, says the writer, is born for adversity – we might have family bust ups but when the heat is on, when the need is there, then so are our families. But it's interesting isn't it, in the same verse, in the same breath the writer mentions friends as well as family. Because some friends are like family – they love us at all times, he says, they are constant friends.

So we've got our friendly phrases haven't we, do you know what I mean – we say

- Look pop round any time
- We say, let's have lunch
- Or my door's always open to you
- Give me a ring
- Just drop in

But that kind of willingness is always tested when the friend is going through a tough time, when she needs help.

So chapter 18 and v24 - **A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.** Do you see what he's saying. He's saying it's at the crisis points that you'll discover who your true friends are. He's saying it's perfectly possible to have any number of friends, but when trouble comes they're no help at all. Yet there is a different kind of friend – a friend who sticks closer than a brother. A friend who will still be around when being around is really costly.

- Maybe you're not very well, perhaps it's a long term illness
- Perhaps you've got marriage problems
- Boyfriend problems
- Work problems
- Financial problems
- Stress problems

Whatever kind of problem it is, the good friend will still be there. Someone put it like this – 'a friend is someone who asks you how you are, and then sticks around long enough to hear the answer'. And according to the Proverbs not just to listen, but to help.

So the constant friend is faithful enough always to help you out – which is more than can be said for the fair weather friend – so 14v20 - **The poor are shunned even by their neighbours, but the rich have many friends.** It's just an observation that in our world a friendship is often for what I can get out of it. And when I can't get anything out of it any more, then I don't need the friendship any more. Which is why the **rich** have many friends, but the **poor** are shunned even by their neighbours. Do you see this is one of those Proverbs which we can easily find exceptions to. But that's not the point, the point is this: the Proverb is asking me, are you a fair weather friend? In other words are you friends with people only when it suits you? Friends with...

- The financially rich
- But not just money...are you attracted to the socially rich, those people who are always having parties and already have loads of friends, who it's good to be seen with...
-

The fair-weather friend might be loyal, but only when it suits him, only because there is something he can get out of it, and if that thing disappears, then so does the fair weather friend.

Whereas the constant friend is faithful enough always to help you out.

When I was at theological college one of the students was having his son baptised and he unwittingly arranged for the baptism to be on the afternoon of the FA cup final. He was the captain of the footy team so he was pretty gutted when he realised, but not as gutted as the rest of the footy team – who nevertheless still came to the baptism. Friendships were certainly tested that afternoon – although most of them did have personal stereos discreetly turned on so that they could follow the game during the service.

Well it's a daft example...but good friends will be there even when it's hard. And so we might ask ourselves – have I got friends like that. Because actually it's at crisis points that we discover who our true friends are. And it is a great thing to have friends like that. But perhaps its not the best question to ask 'are my friends constant friends'. The best question is 'Am I being a constant friend?'

That's what Chapter 27 and v10 says, let's just turn to that one together, 27:10: **Do not forsake your friend and the friend of your father**, In other words don't forsake your friends. And actually don't forsake your family friends when they're in need. You see maybe there's someone who's been a real help to the family down the years. They're not exactly your own personal friend. But maybe they've always been around, maybe it's a friend of mum or dad's, a god parent, who's been praying for you down the years. And the Proverbs are asking, how will you treat them? Will you return the friendship?

And the interesting thing is that if I tend to be that kind of person, this kind of friend, then I'll discover that I also have good friends, who'll help me out when I need them - which is why v10 goes on **Do not forsake your friend and the friend of your father, and do not go to your brother's house when disaster strikes you -- better a neighbour nearby than a brother far away**. In other words you won't always need your family to help you out, because you'll have friends who care for you too. People who **are** faithful friends tend to have faithful friends – friends like family.

Now it's just worth saying isn't that we don't have to be close friends with everyone we meet, we can't be. Life moves on, we're bound to lose touch with certain people. But the issue is this – what will I do when that friend wants to continue as my friend, when it turns out that that friend needs me. Someone put like this – A friend in need...is a pain. But the wise friend doesn't think that, the wise friend is faithful enough always to help you out. That's the first point.

And then here's the second:

***The wise friend is honest enough to be straight with you***

I wonder if you know that kind of conversation we have with people when we run something past someone to ask for their opinion and really all we're after is the rubber stamp. So we ask

- Do you think this is a good idea?

- Was I right to tell her that?
- Do I look nice in this?

And all we want is the answer 'yes', the rubber stamp. But the Proverbs tell us to be careful – beware of the yes-man they say, beware of the flatterer. And that's what chapter 29:5 says - **Whoever flatters his neighbour is spreading a net for his feet.** In other words a flatterer might look like a friend – he bolsters your ego, he never questions, he never argues, he never criticises – he looks like a really good friend, but he's a dangerous person. Because he won't help us or correct us, or show us the right way forward. In fact the Proverb says he spreads a net for our feet – in other words he's like a hunter, and when we happen to wander into his net we get trapped. His flattery traps us.

So for example you have a quarrel, an argument, and you've upset someone and someone's upset you and you both said things you shouldn't have. And you kind of need to get it off your chest so you sort of report back the quarrel to a friend. And if he's a flatterer he will always, always say – 'Well you're absolutely right, no it's just what she needed to hear – someone's got to tell her and you did'. And now you've wandered into the flatterer's net and you're trapped. Because you think you're in the right now, and you think the other person's absolutely wrong, and so you'll never apologise, and you'll never see it their way – and you're trapped in the flatterers net.

Well let's have a look at what the true friend would do – so just turn to chapter 27 and v6.

#### **6 Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses**

What will the real friend do? Well – ironically, he'll wound me. In other words he will love me enough to tell me what is tough to hear. The true friend will knife me with the truth, he'll wound me. He'll bruise my ego for my good.

It is just good to have friends who are bold enough to say Look Joe I think you've dropped a bit of brick on this one, you're wrong, you're being stupid. Because as v6 says, the person who won't say that kind of thing when I need to hear it is actually my enemy.

So beware of the friend who always agrees with you, who always sides with you. Beware of the friend who hasn't got the courage to take you on, who is unwilling to wound, beware of her because actually she's the enemy.

But to be an honest friend means risking disapproval. And the flatterer won't do that because he just wants to be liked. Which is why all of us are tempted to flatter people – because really we all want to be liked by people. But Proverbs chapter 28:23 tells us take the long term view.

#### **23 He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favour than he who has a flattering tongue.**

The thing is we want to be liked now, and we risk disapproval if we take a friend on, but if the advice is sound, they'll thank me for it in the future. Which is why it is a mark of true friendship to tell a non-Christian friend about Jesus. The flatterer wouldn't dare offend a friend by telling them about their sinfulness and the need to be saved from judgement. But if that friend becomes a Christian think how grateful she'll

be on judgement day and in heaven – **He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favour than he who has a flattering tongue.**

One of my friends puts it like this –

- He says gossip is saying something behind someone's back that you'd never say to their face.
- Whereas flattery is saying something to their face, that you'd never say behind their back.

Now of course we all need encouragement – and we need to give people a lot more encouragement than criticism – but it is a good question to ask ourselves – am I just buttering this person up? Am I just confirming them in their error? I must ask myself – would I say what I'm saying now to this person's *face* if I were talking *about* this person to someone else.

It is uncomfortable to have honest friends – but it does us good – 27:17 says - **As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.**

The true friend will be honest enough to be straight with you.

And then third, the good friend is...

### **3. Forgiven enough to bury the hatchet**

In other words when a true friend has been wronged, he will forgive it and forget about it. Which is harder than it sounds. Sometimes it's hard enough to forgive. But to forget a matter is maybe harder.

So we say:

- Look don't worry – it's history
- As far as I'm concerned it's all in the past, it's behind us
- It's water off a duck's back
- It's all water under the bridge
- It's buried, forget about it

We say that, but then lo an behold, out of the blue, it resurfaces, it's mentioned again, you're having an argument and you decide to deploy that deadly sentence:

- Yes but what about the time when you did that!

So just turn to Proverbs 17:9, which says that the true friend will truly bury the hatchet. Proverbs 17:9

**<sup>9</sup> He who covers over an offence promotes love,  
but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.**

**<sup>9</sup> He who covers over an offence promotes love,** - And because friendships depend on love it can just really hurt when someone brings up something which you thought was buried and forgotten. In fact a reluctance to bury the hatchet can be the end of a friendship, even a good friendship, v9 again - **<sup>9</sup> He who covers over an offence promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.**

It is very unwise to reopen the file when the file's been closed. And so the wise friend will learn to cover over wrongs – forgive them, forget them, forever.

He's forgiving enough to bury the hatchet.

And then last...

**4. *The true friend will be sensitive enough never to go too far.***

In other words a really good friend will just take care with a friendship. She put herself in the other person's shoes. She won't push things too far, she'll be tactful, she'll be sensitive.

**So for example the good friend will never outstay his welcome.**

25:17...The advice of 25:17 is this: **17 Seldom set foot in your neighbour's house -- too much of you, and he will hate you.** So you know how it is, some of us just find it really hard to take a hint. We've been invited round to Sunday lunch at 12 O'clock. Lunch is at 1, coffee's on by two and we're still there at six. Or maybe it's the person on the phone who just goes on and on and on, and doesn't matter what you say to them you can't get them off the phone. I understand that's more of a problem with the girls than the blokes. But the real friend will just be sensitive to that kind of thing – he knows the friendship's strong but he takes the advice of v17 and he won't outstay the welcome.

**Or again the good friend never misjudges the moment.**

And we're looking at chapter 27v14: **If a man loudly blesses his neighbour early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse.** In other words it's not just what we say that matters, but when and why we say it. So I wonder if you're a morning person? I don't think I am a very morning person, so any kind of over the top morning cheerfulness doesn't go down that well. There's a time and place for it.

- So criticism when someone's feeling down is difficult to take
- And humour when someone's feeling low is hard to laugh at
- And a chat when someone's feeling stressed is hard to fit in

The point is that although we need to be honest friends, we also need to be sensitive friends. To rein ourselves in when we know someone's finding things difficult. The good friend won't misjudge the moment.

**And then last thing, the good friend never overdoes the joke.**

26:18 and 19 **Like a madman shooting firebrands or deadly arrows is a man who deceives his neighbour and says, "I was only joking!"**

So here's a person who takes a joke too far and then says...just kidding. It's a really strong verse this one. It says the person who does that is really dangerous – he'll either really hurt other people, or really get himself into trouble. Now I can't imagine that this verse is ruling out any kind of joke or prank. Humour's a great thing, but it can be really harmful. And the real friend will take care that his humour doesn't threaten the friendship. There are particular times when humour is particularly in danger of being overdone and maybe a common one is on the stag do. And I say that not just because I'll be having my own stag do soon although I will be posting this verse to my best man immediately. Because a good friend will love you enough to put your feelings first.

So there we are – 4 marks of a good friend. And I want to ask you this evening – are you a good friend?

- Are you faithful enough always to help out? Are you there at the crisis, in the moment of need? Or are you always too busy, a fair weather kind of mate.

- Are you honest enough to be straight with your friends? Do you love them enough to tackle them on the hard things? Or is the desire for an easy life, for approval now too tempting?
- And are you forgiving enough to bury the hatchet. To accept an apology and drop the matter. To forget it for good. Or do the old grudges keep resurfacing?
- And are you sensitive enough never to go too far? To take care with your friends and their feelings. Or do you tend to take advantage of them and presume on the friendship?

Are you a good friend? Well I think we can all read Proverbs like this and feel pretty convicted. We've fallen short of these kinds of standards and made mistakes with our friends. Which why I want to end by focussing on Jesus – he is the ultimate good friend. The New Testament says the Old Testament is all about Jesus – and Jesus embodies these Proverbs about the good friend.

- So do you see Jesus is faithful enough always to help you us. He helps us out in our deepest need – our need to be saved. He could have stayed in heaven, he could left us to perish – but he went further than anyone has ever gone – in giving himself on a cross for his friends, for you and me. He'll always be there for us, he is faithful enough always to help us out.
- And he's honest enough to be straight with us. Read the Gospels – it's hardly flattering, he doesn't shy away from putting his finger on our sin and telling us clearly about hell. He's the ultimate honest friend.
- And yet at the same time he's forgiving enough to bury the hatchet. It's the glory of the gospel isn't it that according to Jesus our sins have been forgiven and forgotten forever – he will never, never raise the matter of them again. Sin has been dealt with.
- And then last he is a sensitive friend. He's never pushy, he's never more than we can bear. Do you remember what it says –<sup>20</sup> A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out. Or again as Jesus said himself: <sup>8</sup> "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (NIV)

In other words Jesus is our ultimate good friend.