

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Everyday Wisdom: Lest I Be a Burden”

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A friend loves at all times, and kinsfolk are born to share adversity.

Proverbs 17:17

Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor’s house, otherwise the neighbor will become weary of you and hate you.

Like vinegar on a wound is one who sings songs to a heavy heart. Like a moth in clothing or a worm in wood, sorrow gnaws at the human heart.

Proverbs 25:17, 20

Perfume and incense make the heart glad, but the soul is torn by trouble.

Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another.

Proverbs 27:9, 17

Today is our final week in this “Everyday Wisdom” series in the Book of Proverbs. Short word about what we’ll start next week. Next Sunday as we mentioned earlier is Rally Day, the unofficial start of our Fall program year. It’s a fun time, honestly. But as we come back, maybe come back for the first time in a while, it’s important that we not lose sight of the very reason we gather for things. So as we come back, we’ll be starting a series “Rediscover Jesus,” a look at parts of his early ministry in the Gospel of Mark. Who does Jesus show us he is? Why does it matter? For some, it might be “rediscovering,” for others it might just be “discovering,” because whether you’ve been a part of Christian community or Christian faith your whole life or whether it’s something new to you altogether, Jesus is someone who is never quite finished showing us something new about who he is and what it means to follow him. So, come, discover, rediscover Jesus. We’ll start that series next week.

As we wrap up this series in Proverbs, I’m again grateful to Pastor Mark for putting it together. Proverbs bounces around a bit, and so have we. So, each week we’ve taken a selection of verses on a particular topic and ask what does Proverbs say about them. Three weeks ago, we talked about anger; two weeks ago, the heart; last week, speech. And though these proverbs can sound a bit like soundbites, there’s something bigger going on. They’re about a life seeking godly wisdom, which is another way of saying, a life aligned with God’s ways, not ours. And to wrap up this series, we look at something all of us seek, crave, avoid in varying degrees: friendship. Let’s go to God’s Word together. [Read passage.]

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

If the devil were crafting a special circle of hell for me—and I'm not sure the whole “special circles of hell” are really a thing—but if he were doing so, I think I know what it would be, or at least two options that would probably be in the running.

The first will take a bit of backstory. Back when I had just started in ministry, I was right out of seminary, moved to Memphis, and I was a single guy. This was before Frances and I had reconnected.

So, being a younger, single guy, new to the city, new to the church, what emerged was, well there's not really a delicate way to put this, what emerged was a coordinated effort by some in the church to marry me off. Now, I had been warned that this might happen. And I acknowledge that beneath all of it wasn't malicious intent, there was a wish for my wellbeing—which is not to assume that being married is inherently better or more godly or more complete than being single; that's a common thought, maybe even an unspoken practice, within the church, and it's wrong, but that's another sermon for another day—but I get the intent, that it wasn't mean-spirited.

But it looked a bit different in the context of a church, specifically in my role as a pastor. It wasn't blind dates or things like that. It would happen on Sunday mornings. After worship, I'd be at the doors greeting folks as they left, and I started noticing that a few people—and they tended to be grandmothers—were bringing by their granddaughters or maybe a “family friend” just to say hello as they were leaving the sanctuary. At first I didn't think anything of it, but when it started happening more regularly, I was thinking, “Even if I thought this was at all appropriate, which I don't, what exactly am I supposed to do there, ask for her number in the greeting line?” And it was painfully awkward, even embarrassing.

And that's how I know that if the devil were crafting a personal hell for yours truly, it might look like an eternal greeting line after a church service, in which every single person asks me about my romantic life. And I share that with you, I share just how uncomfortable that was and would be to emphasize just how equally uncomfortable that second option the devil might consider if he were putting together that personal hell for me. The second one is: that I would be forever forced to ask for and depend upon others for help.

That's a bit of what these Proverbs touch on: the notion of our relationships between each other, the notion of friendship, or fellowship. Kind of comes at it from a few different angles, but you probably caught the drift of it: friends are good. We need friends. We need the right kind of friends. We need the kind of friends that align with, and again this keeps on going back to the point of Proverbs, align with God's ways, align with godly wisdom.

Now if you're like me, this is the point in the sermon where you roll your eyes and go, “Guh, I don't want to hear another ‘Let's all just get along’ talk.”

Friendship itself, if you stop to think about it, is a little strange too. It's not really family, at least not officially, where there's the bond of being related to each other. It's more like, well Bill Murray put it better than I could. He said, “Friendship is so weird. You just pick a human you've met and you're like, ‘Yep, I like this one,’ and you just do stuff with them.”

So how are we supposed to consider our friendships in terms of godly wisdom? What is the wise way to have friends? Kind of an odd way to think of it. Because I remember some friends of mine at various stages of life, and “wise” would be the last word I'd use to describe them or our friendship.

But these proverbs offer a few thoughts on what makes for wise friendship, or friendship that aligns with God's ways.

A few of them seem to have a similar message. That first verse we read, Proverbs 17:17: "A friend loves at all times, and kinsfolk are born to share adversity." Then 27:9: "Perfume and incense make the heart glad; the sweetness of a friend is better than one's own counsel." And 27:17: "Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another." You can hear the message coming through: we need friendships, because we can't make it on our own, but also because it's better, *we're* better when we have the benefit of friendship. Iron sharpens iron. The sweetness of a friend is better than one's own counsel.

And I don't like that. I feel weird for saying that, because I know it's the wrong answer, but I don't like that. This is that special circle of hell for me: always having to ask someone else for help, having to depend on someone else, having to admit that I don't have it all together, when really what I'd very much prefer is that I've got everything handled, no problem here, or more to the point, that everyone *thinks* I've got everything handled. And I've paid the price for that in my life. Burned bridges with people who were close to me, when they sought something deeper with me, while I'd prefer the comfort of my own counsel first.

And this whole message of: "The sweetness of a friend is better than one's own counsel," runs counter to that for me, so this is pressing on me. Makes me want to ignore it.

But right when I'd be tempted to write off what these Proverbs say about friendship and relationships because it's just a pie in the sky, "Why can't we all just get along" pipe dream, it goes and actually says something reasonable, seemingly in the other direction.

Did you hear the other two verse we read? Chapter 25, verses 17 and 20: "Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house, otherwise the neighbor will become weary of you and will hate you." And "Like vinegar on a wound is one who sings songs to a heavy heart. Like a moth in clothing or a worm in wood, sorrow gnaws at a human heart."

Did you notice those? Seems to be pushing us in the opposite direction. While those other three were driving us toward the value, the necessity, the vulnerability of friendship, these two are calling for some boundaries. Don't spend too much time in your neighbor's house, another way of saying, let there be space between people, between neighbors. Don't sing songs to a heavy heart—and by that it means, don't bring fake levity when empathy, maybe even silence, is needed. And both more broadly seem to be saying, there's a need for boundaries in relationships, that your identity shouldn't be subsumed into another's. We have another name for it in more modern tellings: co-dependency, one's need to need someone else, to please someone else, paired up with someone else's need to be needed.

Frances has been reading this book called *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No*. And you can guess from the title what it's about. It's about setting healthy boundaries, and as she's been going through it, she's been chuckling and telling me, "Yeah Jay you don't need to read this." Because she knows that setting boundaries between people is not a lesson I necessarily need to focus on. That comes naturally to me. What I would need to listen to is how to let my guard down more.

And this is something I love about Proverbs: just how it comes at these deceptively simple, maybe universal notions, like friendship, like relationships, but does so from a few different angles, scattered across the book, leaving us to be pushed and pulled by the claims of each one.

For some of us, like me, the lessons, the godly wisdom of needing another person, of being drawn toward another person's counsel or help, and being "sharpened" by another person, those are lessons I need to hear, and I need to hear them over and over and over again, because I will resist them.

But for others, that might not be quite as helpful, at least not by itself. For others, maybe those of us who are perhaps too quick, too eager, too ready to let their own identities be defined by someone else, those words "Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house" become more important for us to hear.

Which ones do you need to hear? Each one of us has our own tendencies toward relationships, toward friendships. Each one of us has our own histories that influence how we approach friendship, how we approach relationships. And those tendencies, those histories might push us toward people, or they might push us away from people, and an important thing to recognize is that we aren't pushed or pulled too close in or too far away.

This whole sermon runs the risk of becoming just a general reflection on friendship with little to distinguish it as necessarily godly friendship or wise friendship in a godly way. So you may be thinking, "Well that sounds exhausting, constantly having to evaluate whether your friendships are too close or too distant, am I too hot, too cold, just right? How am I supposed to figure that out?"

Well the answer, not to be too simplistic about it, is not in ourselves, not in our own tendencies or preferences or histories. As it has been with all the other Proverbs we've looked at, the root of it all isn't our own wisdom or insight but in the fear of the Lord. The same goes for friendships too.

You heard those words earlier from the Book of Romans, "Let love be genuine," "Love one another with mutual affection," and "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." Same sort of thought here, but again it's not just "Be nice to people;" it's rooted in how the body of Christ should operate if Christ is truly at the center of it. When Christ is at the heart, it means we are more concerned with how our identities are being shaped by him than with how they are being shaped by one another. When Christ is at the heart, we know by recognizing our own sinfulness that we don't have it all together nor should we ever for a second think that we do. When Christ is at the heart, friendship, true godly friendship, points to him and not to itself.

Are these the kinds of relationships that we have? Are these the kinds of relationships we have in our church? Maybe so in some cases. Maybe not in others. If you answer that question and you think, yes, I know that that's what I see and recognize in some of the friendships I have in Christ, then praise God for it. If you answer that question and you think, well, maybe not so much, then maybe we look together at how we do connect as a church. Maybe we take a closer look at how we connect in fellowship and discipleship, growing closer to each other as we seek Christ together.

Yesterday at Joe Reed's service, I was struck by something that a close friend of Joe's had said before he read a Scripture passage. He shared just how close the two of them had gotten, but the way he put it was very powerful. They had been friends for a long time, but their friendship had gotten even closer in recent years because, as he put it, "For the last 8-9 years, we were close in our love for God, instead of just our love for each other."

May every friendship be as wise as that; may every friendship have that same root.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.