**The Wisdom of Friendships**

Text: Proverbs 6:1-5; 14:21; 17:17; 27:6; 27:17

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**Scriptures:** Proverbs 6:1-5; 14:21; 17:17; 18:24; 27:6; 27:17; John 15:12-17

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL]27, 204, 88, 510, 390, 513

**Series:** **Proverbs.** Sermon 7.

**Theme:** Having wise relationships with neighbours and friends

**Proposition:** Christ is the best friend forever

**Introduction**

Today, a major event in a person’s life can be broadcast on social media by indicating that someone is ‘in a relationship’. For example, Facebook has categories ‘close friends’ and ‘acquaintances’. Relationships, from close fellowship to more distant associations, are essential for a healthy life lived wisely as God intends for human beings made in His image. As God said (Gen 2:18) “*It is not good that man should be alone*”. Tim Lane and Paul Tripp express this universal truth in their book ‘relationships – a mess worth making’ when they write “*We know that we are less than human when we are* ***alone***”.

To be human is to be a person created in the image of God. The image of the Triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) in man is that of a community connected by loving bonds of fellowship. It’s not surprising then that we are designed by our Creator to be ‘in a relationship’ – first and foremost with God and secondly with other people.

We’ve seen in previous weeks that the book of Proverbs addresses the relationship between parents and children in chapter 4 and between married couples in chapter 5. Now from the start of chapter 6, we look at friendship – a topic about which Proverbs contains much wisdom – for those who will listen.

We’ve met a number of characters in the book of Proverbs including the sinner, the scoffer, the fool, the forbidden woman, the father, the son, the husband and the bride. This morning we meet ‘the neighbour’. The Hebrew word (‘rea’) translated ‘neighbour’ in the book of Proverbs has a wide range of meanings from close friend through to more distant acquaintance. The English term ‘fellow’ reflects this range.

For example, a fellow (rea) may be an opponent in a court of law e.g. Proverbs 18:17 “*The one who states his case first seems right, until the other (rea) comes and examines him.”* Or a ‘fellow’ may be the closest of friends: e.g. Proverbs 17:17 “*A friend (rea) loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity*.” The word ‘neighbour’ in Lev 19:18 is also a translation of the Hebrew word ‘rea’. “*you shall love your neighbour (rea) as yourself*’”.

Let’s begin by looking at the ‘good neighbour’

1. **The good neighbour**

Fewer and fewer people in our 21st century New Zealand communities know their neighbours – those who live around them on their street - or, in the case of church-attending Christians, those who live in close proximity to the church property. Many of us can easily retreat into our own houses and have little or nothing to do with those who live only a few meters away from us across the fence which separates us from our neighbours. How well do you know your immediate neighbours around where you currently live? How much do you have to do with them? If they had a need, would you know? Would you go out of your way to help?

This ‘good neighbour’ took upon himself an **open-ended liability** for the care and rehabilitation of the unfortunate victim, saying to the innkeeper: “*Take care of him, and whatever more you spend (above the 2 denarii already given), I will repay you when I come back*”

Proverbs 6:1-5 deals with a **different situation** with a neighbour: warning against pledging oneself for another person’s debts. In the ancient world the pledge was often made with a garment (20:16; 27:13). This article of clothing was a symbolic substitute for the person himself. The one giving the pledge assumed responsibility for the payment of the debt. The guarantor’s future then depended on the ability of the borrower to pay the debt and their integrity to fulfil their obligations to do so.

In today’s commercial world, many contracts such as sale and purchase agreements, taking out an insurance policy or loan arrangement have what is termed a cooling-off period - a period after a sale contract is agreed during which the buyer can cancel the contract without incurring a penalty.

The wisdom of Proverbs with regard to taking on the debt of a neighbour is ‘if you’ve entered into such an arrangement, try to get out of it as quickly as you can’. Notice the **urgency** in v3 ‘go, hasten’, ‘plead’, ‘give your eyes no sleep’. Many of us today, living in an urban, industrialised age have little knowledge of hunting; unlike the original readers of Proverbs. They would know that gazelles were hard to catch, being very fast on their feet and tending to panic when confined. Likewise, birds, once aware that they are caught in a trap, give all their attention to escaping the hunter’s hand. The picture here is clear, if you can**, run away** from a situation where you become liable for your neighbour’s debts. By being alert and acting swiftly you may be able escape to the entrapment of being liable - whilst still in the ‘cooling off period’.

Remember again that the Proverbs are **not** mathematical formulae – like 2+2=4! There may be situations in life where taking on the debts of another person might be the merciful, generous and right course of action – as it was in the parable which Jesus told. However, the wise neighbour is careful in binding him or herself to financial commitments which may put him/herself in danger.

The proverbs repeatedly warn about attracting ‘friends’ who are really not friends at all, just neighbours who see the opportunity for personal gain from the generosity of others e.g. Proverbs 19:4 “*Wealth brings many new friends (rea), but a poor man is deserted by his friend (rea)*”. Proverbs 19:6 “*Many seek the favour of a generous man, and everyone is a friend to a man who gives gifts*”. Here’s the warning again: Proverbs 18:24a “*A man of many companions may come to ruin*”. Much wisdom is needed in deciding how best to help others – such help may at times include pledging money or material possessions.

What else does Scripture have to teach us about being a good neighbour?

* A good neighbour is a person who does not withhold good from those to whom it is due (Prov 3:27).
* A good neighbour is does not gossip and pull down others, but knows when to hold her tongue e.g. Prov 11:12 “*Whoever belittles his neighbour lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent*” (also 12:23; 13:3; 17:28; 18:2)
* A good neighbour does good to everyone, especially to those who are of the household of faith (Gal 6:10)

**Jesus was a good neighbour when he lived on this earth.** He was slandered by his opponents when they said of Him Luke 7:34 “The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34). Jesus was not a glutton nor a drunkard, but he was certainly a good neighbour to tax collectors and sinners. He kept company with many people who were ‘the dregs of society’. People like Zacchaeus, a prostitute, a sinful woman who washed his feet with her hair. He touched lepers, and spoke with those possessed by demons.

Why was Jesus a good neighbour to such people? Because, in His own words He came “*to seek and to save the lost*" (Luke 19:10). Jesus also said "*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners*." (Mark 2:17)

Jesus was a good neighbour when he lived on this earth, calling people to follow Him. Are you a good neighbour, associating – ‘being in relationships with’ a range of different people **outside** the church community and calling them to follow Jesus? Without Jesus, your neighbours are spiritually needy, afflicted and poor.

1. **The good friend**

Psychologists estimate that only 10% of men have any real friends. Women tend to ‘do friendship’ ‘better’ than most men. There are many reasons why some of us, both men and women, may have few close friends. These include: individualism and isolation, perhaps busyness and a proliferation of electronic devices which keep so many of us glued to screens for so much of the time.

Have you watched the 2014 ‘Look up’ YouTube video by Gary Turk? 61,028,509 people have (well they had by last night!). Here’s the first part of the sound track – it’s about social media:

*I have 422 friends, yet I am lonely.
I speak to all of them every day, yet none of them really know me.*

*The problem I have sits in the spaces between,
looking into their eyes, or at a name on a screen.*

*I took a step back, and opened my eyes,
I looked around, and then realised
that this media we call social, is anything but
when we open our computers, and it’s our doors we shut.*

*All this technology we have, it’s just an illusion,
of community, companionship, a sense of inclusion
yet when you step away from this device of delusion,
you awaken to see, a world of confusion.*

We need to spend time together with people to develop and maintain true friendships and to be a good friend to others. Let’s look at 3 characteristics of a good friend from the book of Proverbs:

1. **A good friend is faithful, loyal, and constant**

Proverbs 17:17 “*A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.”* Proverbs 18:24 “*A man of many companions (rea) may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother*.”

An example of a good friendship in Scripture is the relationship between Jonathan and David (1 Sam 18). We read in 1 Samuel 18:1 “*As soon as he had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul*”. Jonathan saw that David viewed life from the same divine perspective as he did himself.

A deep friendship is not a relationship where both friends **think alike on all matters**, but they do share the same world-view and approach to life. That is why a Christian friendship with another believer always has the potential to be much deeper than any friendship with a non-believer can ever be.

Here are some characteristics of close friendships in the Lord (From R. Kent Hughes, ‘Disciplines of a Godly Man’):

* You assent to the same authority
* You know the same God
* You are going the same way
* You long for the same things
* You are committed to your friend

Think of Ruth’s confession to Naomi (Ruth 1:16) "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

In a close Christian friendship:

* You are compassionate, kind and generous
* You yearn for the same experiences of holiness and worship
* To be a good friend is to desire the very best for the other person

In Jonathan’s case to help make the shepherd boy David into a royal king

1. **A good friend gives wise counsel**

1 Samuel 23:16 “*And Jonathan, Saul's son, rose and went to David at Horesh, and strengthened his hand in God*”. Jonathan pointed David upward.

A good friend gives wise counsel. Proverbs 13:20 “*Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm”.* Proverbs 27:6 “*Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.”* ‘only a true friend would say that!’ Proverbs 27:17 “*Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.”* – ‘A healthy clash of personalities or views’

1. **A good friend does not unwisely intrude into the lives of others**

Proverbs 25:17 “*Let your foot be seldom in your neighbour’s house, lest he have his fill of you and hate you”.* There’s an old saying “All our guests bring us pleasure, some when they arrive and some when the leave!” A good friend does not smother others, but understands that it is healthy for everyone to have multiple interpersonal relationships. All relationships need boundaries. A good friend respects these. **Are you a good friend?**

It’s interesting that in the covenant community of the church, the bond between the saints is not described in terms of friendship but of being family; brothers and sisters in Christ. Author Harper Lee famously wrote “*You can choose your friend but you sure can't choose your family!*”. Ultimately in the sovereign providence of God we have not chosen who is part of this church family – God has! He’s put us all together here – a ‘mixed bag’ of people called to live together in relationship with one another for example to:

* Love one another.” ([1 John 3:11](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/1%20John%203.11))
* Be patient, bearing with one another in love.” *(*[Eph 4:2](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Eph%204.2)*)*
* Be kind and compassionate to one another…” ([Eph 4:32](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Eph%204.32))
* Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” ([Eph 5:21](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Eph%205.21))
* “Teach… [one another]” ([Col 3:16](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Col%203.16))
* “…Admonish one another ([Col 3:16](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Col%203.16))
* “…Make your love increase and overflow for each other.” ([1 Thess 3:12](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/1%20Thess%203.12))
* “…Build each other up…” ([1 Thess 5:11](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/1%20Thess%205.11))
* “Encourage one another daily…” [Heb 3:13](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/Heb%203.13))
* “Pray for each other.” ([James 5:16](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/James%205.16))
* “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.” ([1 Peter 4:9](https://biblia.com/bible/nkjv/1%20Pet%204.9))

Often the problem in our churches is not that we are **too often** in our neighbour’s house, whether that neighbour be a brother or sister in Christ in this congregation, or a non-believer we know. The problem can be that we are **never or seldom** in their house, nor they in ours!

Who could you be a good friend to in this congregation? Who could you invite into your home without grumbling? Perhaps you find it difficult to befriend people you do not know or who are of a different background or stage of life to you? If this is a hurdle for you, brother and sister, your Best Friend can help with His wise counsel…which brings us to our last point

1. **The best friend**

In your relationships in life, have you ever:

* Felt misunderstood?
* Been hurt by a friend or acquaintance?
* Felt like you haven’t been heard?
* Been betrayed?
* Disagreed with others?
* Experienced conflict?
* Felt used and taken advantage of?
* Held a grudge or have someone hold one against you?
* Experienced loneliness?

“*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin*” (Heb 4:15) The perfect man, Jesus Christ, gives us an example not only of how to be a good neighbour but also how to have wise friendships. His ministry was centred around deep interpersonal relationships with the twelve disciples, whom he called his ‘friends’.

There was the ‘disciple whom Jesus loved’ (John 13:23). There was an inner circle of three (James, John and Peter) with whom Jesus was especially close. There were the 12 disciples who travelled with Jesus as He ministered. Moving further outwards in terms of closeness of relationship there were the 72 whom Jesus sent out (Luke 10:1). Jesus was faithful, loyal and constant with his disciples. He gave them wise counsel through his teaching and example.

There is more to Jesus that this though. Jesus is the **good neighbour**, who, like the good Samaritan enters into a relationship with helpless sinners like you and me who are spiritually needy, afflicted and poor. He binds our wounds and pays the price for our restoration. Jesus is the **good friend** who, like Jonathan, who makes ordinary people like you and me into royalty – children of God, the Great King.

How does Jesus do this? By being **in a relationship** with people like you and me. Remember He said "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6). Just as God calls Abraham His friend (2 Chron 20:7; Isaiah 41:8) because of his faith which was counted to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6; James 2:23), so Jesus calls us His friends if we have faith which God counts to us as righteousness because Jesus.

“*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays 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 15:14-15).

The friendship of Christ is not conditional (IF you do what I command) but is based on faith which is proven through consistent (though never perfect) obedience. Jesus demonstrated His love by laying down his life for his friends. Jesus was abandoned by all – He was utterly alone on the cross. In the words of the last line of Psalm 88 ‘*my companions (rea) have become darkness*’

No friendship with God remained at that place and time. No friendships with fellow human beings had lasted…all have left him, including his betrayer Judas Iscariot. He knew the bitter pain of a friend who had turned into an enemy. Psalm 41:9 “*Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me.”*

He willingly made himself surety for others. Pledging his life for theirs. Paying the debt for rebels like you and me. During His life on this earth he could have, in the words of Proverbs 6:3 ‘saved himself’. He could have gone, hastened, and given his eyes no sleep until he had escaped the ‘snare’ of the cross like a fleeing gazelle or bird. He could have avoided the price he paid at Calvary, but he did not…

“*And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (Phil 2:8)

Why because He loves His friends. He is faithful and loyal to his friends. He laid down his life for his friends. You are his friend if you have faith in Jesus as your only Saviour, as demonstrated by your desire to do what your Lord commands.

Are you ‘*in a relationship with Jesus*’? (pause)

BFF ‘a form of written digital affection in the 21st century’ commonly stands for "Best Friends Forever", **Jesus is the very Best Friend and He is a Friend Forever.**

He has said of His friends, for whom He died: “*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand*” (John 10:28).

So ‘Look Up’ to Jesus as your BFF!

AMEN