

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon Series: Biblical Responses to Cultural Messaging

The Relationship Challenge (Proverbs)

Study #4

Introduction: Of vegetables and friendships...

Have I mentioned (lately) that I enjoy growing vegetables? Yes, it's a challenge to grow edibles here in South Texas where there is too much heat, not enough rain, and dirt instead of soil.

But I like trying. I'm good at trying. Maybe, like me, you like trying at gardening, too.

Full disclosure, though, I have mostly given up on gardening for this season. A couple of weeks ago I decided to let the tomatoes and peppers, the chard and the beans, and even the okra die in this unrelenting heat. It just wasn't worth it.

In fact, there is only one vegetable that I have continued to baby, to nurture, and to water. I'll tell you about it near the end today...

The cultural message...

Today, in wrapping up our series of studies titled, "Biblical Responses to Cultural Messaging," my aim is to present a uniquely Christian response to a critical challenge our culture faces.

It's the relationship challenge.

Of course, the world has always had a hard time with relationships. So, the fact that in 2022 we struggle, relationally, isn't news. We broke from an intact relationship with God early on, and nothing has been quite right since.

Relationship challenges explain wars and uprisings, divorces and family feuds. Violence and fragmenting societies are due, fundamentally, to an inability and an unwillingness to get along.

But I am going to suggest that you and I wrestle with getting along in a uniquely challenging time and in uniquely challenging ways.

For one thing, there is technology available to us that hasn't been around all that long. If it seems like the Internet, with its information and algorithms and graphics, has always existed, that's because it is so...everywhere. But it is new.

Email and social media and virtual reality have only been available to us for a very few years. And it is taking time to figure out how to use these in the healthiest possible ways.

I'm not opposed to tech at all. High-tech is great. But high-tech gadgets can keep us from high touch relating.

For another thing, Covid. The last two plus years have been extremely disruptive in most every way imaginable. Relationally, Covid has been disruptive in the extreme.

You don't need me to tell you that. We all know that. We are all suffering from an historic lack of presence. We were designed by God to relate to each other in person. Our generation is in danger of forgetting how to do this.

And one more thing I'll mention. There are voices telling us, and there is a spirit permeating our age, that is antithetical to relational health. The message and the spirit say that we should remain in any given relationship as long as it is pleasant.

But, when problems arise or when getting along is difficult or when the relationship becomes burdensome, we leave that person to establish something easier with someone else.

We face these and many other challenges to relating well in 2022.

So, for the next few minutes I'll bring a message from the Bible that I hope will help us all take next steps toward healthy, Jesus-centered, committed relationships.

Consider this an equipping message from the Old Testament book of Proverbs designed to direct us into this kind of relating - healthy, Jesus-centered, and committed.

Proverbially speaking...

The book of Proverbs was largely written by King Solomon to give us practical advice leading to a God-honoring life. He says that the key to that kind of a life is *wisdom*.

We Westerners may think of wisdom as untangling tangled philosophical knots. But that is not what the Bible means by the word.

Solomon has in mind something extremely practical and down to earth. Biblically speaking, wisdom is *skill*¹ that links *common sense* to a *reverence for God*.²

Today, we are seeking wisdom to handle relationships in a God-honoring way. Or, as I'll be describing them today, friendships.³

¹ There are a couple of fascinating uses of the word "wisdom" in the Old Testament. In Job 39:17, the ostrich's lack of ability to rear her young is seen as a lack of wisdom (i.e., she has no skill in mothering). Then, in Jeremiah 4:22, the prophet rebukes the Jews for their sin. What he says, though, is that they have "*skill* (the word is "*chokmah/wisdom*") **in doing evil!**" They are good at sin.

² The fear of God is a recognition that He is our judge, is majestic, and is Lord.

³ Solomon writes about the transcendent value of worship and the need for diligence in work (as opposed to the habits of the sluggard). He speaks of the need for sexual and self-control and of the beauty of sex in marriage. He urges us to

A word about friendship...

The word *friend* may conjure up all kinds of images in your mind, ranging from a 1990's sitcom to a congressman's cynical reference to his political opponents.

But Jesus forever elevated the whole idea of friendship when He referred to His followers, as His "**friends**." That's right. Jesus calls us His friends. (John 15:15)

And you and I are going to discover that if we are wise, we will pursue friendship for all we're worth.⁴ After all, we all really do thirst for healthy, Jesus-centered, committed friendships.

So, our first glances into Proverbs will bring us some friendly warnings.

About some things it is true that if it waddles like a duck and quacks like a duck, it is probably a duck. But not everything that looks like a friend is a friend. There are counterfeits.

Some people who appear to be friends are not. They lack the strength of commitment. They are short-term and temporary.

Avoiding Friends...

...Who are Temporary

[19:6] Many will seek the favor of a generous person, And every person is a friend to him who gives gifts.

compassion and to a ministry mindset. He gives guidance on right and wrong ways to handle money, how to deal with those in authority - and much more besides.

⁴ The most common Hebrew word for *friend* can also be translated *neighbor*. At times, the word signifies only "*the other person*" in conversation (who may be a stranger). At other times it signifies a person with whom we have close fellowship. This is the normal sense when we read of a friend in the book of Proverbs.

King Solomon tells us that if we have something of value (money, popularity, time, or power), people may flock to us. But many of these friends won't last.

No doubt Solomon knew this relational dynamic, first-hand.

A king's entourage will consist of some genuine friends AND some people who are just along for the ride. These friends surround him just because of his fame and fortune.

Powerful people in our own world experience much the same thing. "Friends" flock to rock stars, rising politicians, and star athletes.

Lose an election, though, or lose a step on the field and your circle of friends will decrease. Be on the alert for friends who would desert you after they fleece you.

There are others who masquerade as friends. They want you to think that they are friends, but they're not.

Here's a verse we'll see a couple of times this morning. On this first go-around, we'll key in on the second line.

...Driven by an Agenda (he's out to get you)

***[27:6] Faithful are the wounds of a friend,
But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.***

This friend greets you with the greeting customary to a friend. In Latin America or in the Middle East, that's a kiss. In other settings, it's a warm embrace or a firm handshake.⁵

But this friend's kiss doesn't express sincerity or affection. He just wants to take you in so that he can get from you what he wants.

God gave us things to use and people to treasure. Faux friends reverse that. They use people and treasure their things.

⁵ We can't forget the kiss of Judas' greeting in the Garden when he betrayed Jesus to the Romans.

If we would be wise, we will keep our eye out for fake friends and have nothing to do with them.

There can be no doubt about it. The pursuit of friendship requires attentiveness and discernment. Finding friends who are friends indeed can be tough.

In fact, Solomon would tell us that the only thing more dangerous than friendship is not having friends.

...Is Dangerous (no "Lone Rangers")

***[18:1] One who separates himself seeks his own desire,
He quarrels against all sound wisdom.***

The "Lone Ranger" is iconic Americana. The Lone Ranger speaks of rugged individualism.

And we rightly admire guts and responsibility and courage. Jesus expects us to take care of our own obligations.

But if we become islands who have no deep relational connection with those who can help us when we're down, we've walked a foolish road.

This is the loner, and the loner is swimming in dangerous waters - no matter how many Facebook friends or Instagram followers he has.

So, there are imposters who pose as friends we need to avoid. We sure don't need temporary and pretend friends.

But we do NEED friends. We need the real thing.⁶
So, in what follows, we are not going to focus on the counterfeit, but on Solomon's descriptions of a true friend.

⁶ I'm told that US Treasury officials whose job is to identify counterfeit money are trained first to identify the real thing. When they know the real thing cold, they can spot the funny money every time.

The first thing we'll note is that a true friend is not a fair-weather friend.

You've heard the saying, "*He's a good man in a storm*"? A true friend is a friend in time of need when the storms of life hit.

He or she is a foul-weather friend.

True Friends...

...Give the Gift of PRESENCE

[18:24] A person of too many friends comes to ruin, But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

This proverb affirms what we all know: When times are tough, we need a Velcro friend.⁷

- "Brother-friends" (or "sister-friends") are the ones you want standing next to you at the graveside.
- They will be with you in the hospital.
- They'll help you pick up the pieces of your life after a business failure, after a personal tragedy, after a moral blowout.

When it seems like the whole world is against you, the friend "***who sticks closer than a brother***" is right beside you.

There is simply nothing as therapeutic, as healing, as comforting, as sitting across from a friend to talk through a tragedy, to share life, to go heart to heart.

Now, because it isn't always possible to be right there with our friend, here's a way for our technologies to be helpful. Brother / Sister friends get as close as possible.

⁷ Solomon is of a mind that there is no better picture of a deep relationship than that which should exist between brothers. That is why David, Solomon's father, referred to Jonathan, his closest friend, as his "***brother***" in 2 Samuel 1:26.

If we can't be physically present, we Zoom.⁸ If we can't Zoom, we phone. If we can't phone, we email or text or write a letter.

We get as close as we can because friends give the gift of presence.

This particular gift of friendship - presence - is especially needed in today's disconnected, Covid-damaged world.

Another characteristic of the friendship we need is honesty. Listen for the second time to the words of Proverbs 27:6. This time, we listen most closely to the first line.

...Are (sometimes brutally) HONEST

[27:6] Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.

On Wednesday morning, I have an appointment with a man who is going to take a very sharp knife and cut into my right leg to replace my knee.

He's done this before and is quite good at it. I've actually asked him to do this. I'm paying him to cut me.

Surgeons all over San Antonio do this every day. They know their cutting is going to cause pain. But, to promote overall health, they hack away at their patient's bodies.

Who would have thought that this is a biblical picture of friendship? But it is.

A friend won't give you empty flattery. In fact, she'll tear into you. But the wounds of this friend are better than the insincere kiss of an enemy.

⁸ I'm thankful for Zoom. During a crisis, it is great. I maintain some relationships via Zoom with people I'm a long way away from.

Sometimes, friendship requires lancing of a friend's boil with a loving, well-timed rebuke. The friend loves so much that he's willing to risk rejection by wielding a scalpel and telling you the hard truth.

Thank God for the friend who is willing to be a soul surgeon.

There are some of you here who have told me what I have needed to hear rather than what I would have liked to hear. I am forever in your debt.

You've pulled me aside - as recently as this week - and taken the risk to tell me something that was hard for you to say. You even thought about emailing me, but you decided to say it to my face. Thanks!

I'm a better man for having had friends willing to speak the truth in love. We all need a surgeon friend or two or three in our lives.

So, a true friend is concerned that his friend traffics in truth. One verse from among many we could choose highlights this aspect of friendship so clearly that I want to mention it here.

...Provide Loving and Wise COUNSEL

***[27:9] Oil and perfume make the heart glad,
And a person's advice is sweet to his friend.***

Back in the mid-1800's, the western world witnessed the birth of professional counseling.

In recent decades, there has also developed a whole branch of counseling that is solidly Christ-centered and Scriptural. I praise God for that development.

We all applaud the efforts of men and women who work hard to wisely apply Scripture's truths to serious personal issues.

And I believe that there is an important place for the trained, professional counselor in our world today.

But, as much as I thank God for the skilled professional counselors I know, Solomon speaks of the therapeutic impact of a friend in the life of his friend.

The sincere counsel of a friend is like sweet perfume. Friendship's encouragement, exhortation, rebuke, and advice lingers long after the remark is made.

Why? Because our friends love us. Our friends know us. We know that they care for us.⁹

If you are going to be that kind of a friend, you are going to have to take the risk of talking about things other than the weather and public policy and politics.

You're going to have to learn to ask open-ended questions. Probe. Pry. Snoop. Open Pandora's Box.

You'll need to be willing to pepper your friend with questions that explore her soul and that will expose motivation. You'll need to go to a place that might uncover a raw nerve.

If you would be a friend who lives out Proverbs 27:9, one whose counsel to your friend is like sweet perfume, you will go below the surface, probe fearlessly into your friend's soul, and point him or her to Jesus.

Solomon says that in a genuine friendship there is:

- **PRESENCE:** Consistent support - especially in the tough times.
- **HONESTY:** Truth-telling, no holds barred.
- **COUNSEL:** Thoughtful input that leads to insight.
God made us for that kind of friendship. So...

Are you growing to become that kind of a friend to the people in your life? You are? Great!

⁹ There are lots of studies that say that "lay counselors" and "peer counselors" often do a better, more credible job of counseling than the paid professionals.

If not, you can make it your aim to give your friends presence, honesty, and (when appropriate) counsel.

Do you have these friends in your life? You do? Great!

If not, you can pray that God will bring them to you. You can keep your eyes open for them. You can even approach current friends and ask them to join you in a growing deeper friendship.

Next, let's consider a couple of costs that are always going to be involved in developing life-changing, soul-to-soul friendships AND one really great benefit.

The first cost of friendship may sound funny, but it speaks of a profound truth.

Friendship's...

...Costs

Friendship costs SENSITIVITY (27:14)

***[27:14] One who blesses his friend with a loud voice early in the morning,
It will be considered a curse to him.***

OK. So, you are a morning person. Your friend is not. She shows up for work, but barely. Her body is there, but her mind, spirit, and soul are still in the car, deciding whether to come inside.

You bounce into her office with a loud, boisterous, jovial greeting and a quick practical joke at the coffee machine.

How is that greeting going to impact your friend? It won't go well. More than likely, she'll be irritated and resentful.

This proverb is addressing more than loud morning greetings. Solomon is telling us to choose for our expressions those that will most effectively meet the need of our friend.

For instance, if, because of an experience your friend has just had, the expression that best meets his need is calm and tranquility, then you will tailor your expression to meet that need - even though you are ecstatic about something that's occurred in your own life.

If your friend has just received wonderful news and greets you with that news, then even though you may be in emotional turmoil about some issue you're facing, your commitment to bless your friend will override your own angst and you'll rejoice with him.

You'll rejoice with those who rejoice and will weep with those who weep (Romans 12).

I want to look at one final cost of friendship today. Proverbs says so much about it that we dare not pass it by.

Over time, a good friendship will not only be marked by much good conversation and verbal kindnesses and sweet counsel.

It will also be marked by strategic and well-placed silence.

Friendship costs SILENCE

Silence is golden when a friend has suffered great loss

***[10:19] Where there are many words, transgression is unavoidable,
But he who restrains his lips is wise.***

When your friend is exhausted or tense or depressed or angry or grieving, it is possible that your greatest gift to him or to her might be the sound of silence.

More often than we would ever dream, it is just fine to have nothing to say.

Remember the book of Job. Job had three friends with him who came to comfort him in his intense pain and sorrow. For seven days

they were wonderful comforters. They didn't say a word but sat with him in silence.¹⁰

Everything went south when they spoke.

Silence is golden when your friend is hurting. And silence is golden when your friend trusts you with a secret.

Silence is golden when there is a confidence to be kept

[11:13] One who goes about as a slanderer reveals secrets, But one who is trustworthy conceals a matter.

Knowledge is power. And if you become a friend to someone - as we have listened to Solomon describe friendship - there will be exposure. Over time, you will accumulate enough knowledge about your friend to sink him.

Over time, he has come to trust you with his secrets. You hold his life and his reputation in your hands. Don't violate that trust. If you want to be a friend, keep a confidence.

Gossip, sugar-coated as a prayer request, is still gossip. And the effect of gossip is the relational equivalent of cancer.

Gossip is ugly and it is death to reputations and to unity. Friends keep confidences confidential.

Pay the costs of friendship - space, sensitivity, kindness, silence - and over time, you will reap the benefits of friendship.

Solomon says that deeper than surface-level friendship will cause you to grow. It will mature you. Or, as one proverb puts it, you get sharpened.

¹⁰ The most therapeutic gift I received at my mother's funeral (I remember this gift from 1980 like it was yesterday) was an embrace, followed by a five second eyeball to eyeball loving stare from a friend who didn't utter a word as the tears streamed down his face. I don't remember a single word said to me by anyone from that day.

...Benefit (one of many)

***[27:17] Iron sharpens iron,
So one person sharpens another.***

Sharpening occurs when two hard objects strike each other. When iron meets iron, sparks fly. Sometimes the friction caused by the clash generates heat.

And, yes, when friends interact, it may not always be nice and comfortable. But in an honest, loving, respectful exchange both friends will grow.

The Lord who calls us His friends (John 15:15) is pleased to use our friendships with each other to shape us and mold us into His image.

Conclusion:

I gave up on my garden this summer because it wasn't worth it to water my tomato and pepper plants every day and never see any fruit. I was tired of watering beans and squash and okra without ever getting to pick anything to take inside.

The one vegetable I am still putting energy into growing is the one that I can't eat. I'm still working hard on my asparagus plants.

I planted asparagus a little over a year ago, and it is healthy. But I'm not supposed to harvest until the third year. Before that, the plant isn't mature enough to handle being harvested.

So, different crops produce at different rates and to different effects.

Radishes are ready to eat about thirty days after planting. But then, they are radishes.

Tomatoes and other standard summer plants take more time and more work, but they are tastier than radishes and more expensive.

Asparagus, though, is among Kathy's and my favorite vegetable. It's delicious and it's expensive. So, if it takes some committed work before harvesting, I'm willing to go the extra mile to have a ready supply of asparagus.

The garden lesson here is that a plant that requires little (radishes) yields little; a plant that requires much (asparagus) yields much.

With respect to the theme for today, you and I can putter around in the garden of friendship if we wish and plant "radish friendships" that require little of us.

We can keep our relationships surfacy, virtual, and at arm's-length. We can leave when the going gets tough to start new shallow friendships. Those friendships are guaranteed to produce a small crop.

Or we can go counter cultural and commit to the more labor-intensive but infinitely more rewarding cash crop of deep friendship. Friendship with Jesus at the center.

Deep friendship, as we have seen today from Proverbs, involves giving the gifts of presence, honesty, and loving counsel. It costs us sensitivity to our friend's need and a willingness to grant silence.

But the harvest of an asparagus friendship is growth in character and mutual sharpening. Friendship is one of the chief tools God uses to transform us into the people He wants us to be.

Can we each make it our aim to take one step toward deepening a Jesus-centered friendship in a face-to-face encounter this week?