

THE GIFT OF FRIENDSHIP AND THE GODLINESS OF GOOD FRIENDS

By Kevin DeYoung

Senior Pastor, University Reformed Church
East Lansing, Michigan

thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung

Copyright (c) Kevin DeYoung 2011

We talk a lot about relationships in the church.

There are scores of marriage seminars, retreats, and conferences. There are video series and books for newlyweds and engaged couples. Most every church offers marital counseling and most every pastor preaches somewhat regularly on marriage. And the same is true for parenting. There are dozens of books on raising children. There are Sunday school classes, blog sites, and ministries that focus on the parenting relationship. All this is good.

But have you ever noticed we seldom study friendship? It is the most important-least talked about relationship in the church.

Think about your greatest joys in life. They probably center around your friends—the fun times hanging out, the great conversations, the laughter, the sharing, the pleasure of “clicking” (not cliquing!) with someone else or a group of people.

And now think of the most painful times in life. No doubt, sickness and tragedy are on the list. And yet, oftentimes these difficulties are made sweeter by the support of friends and family. But when friendship goes bad—when things get awkward or you feel like you are on the outside looking in—no amount of health and prosperity can fill the gap. Almost anything bad can be wonderful with friends, and almost anything good can be terrible without them.

The worst summer of my life was the summer I spent holed up in a cabin in the mountains of Colorado working on a national government textbook. For three months I worked 10 hours a day studying political science with a classmate and our college professor. We had no electricity (we charged our laptop batteries in town every day) and no indoor plumbing (we used an outhouse). But that wasn't the main problem. I got used to the rustic lifestyle. The problem was the absence of friends. I was surrounded by amazing natural beauty, engaged in work that I liked fairly well, and allowed time every night and every weekend to read, run, or explore. But I was miserable because I felt all alone.

It's surprising we don't talk more about friendship in the church. Depending on how you define

friendship, the Bible may have more to say about the friend relationship than it does about marriage and parenting. Further, I bet church “satisfaction” is largely based on two things. If you find happy churchgoers I wager you’ll find these two items present, and where church members are unhappy, I can almost guarantee these two things are missing: quality teaching and quality relationships. No doubt, there are many other important aspects of church life. But for most folks these are the two that matter most. People want a church that teaches them well (which includes sermons, songs, classes, and Bible studies) and a church where they can make friends.

I don’t know if making friends is harder than ever. In some ways, with travel and technology, it is easier than it used to be. But there are still a number of factors that mitigate against genuine friendship.

- We are extremely mobile, moving from place to place, rarely settling down in one spot for a long time.
- We are consumed by family life, pouring almost all our spare time into our children and what’s left over into our spouse.
- We are deceived by email and Facebook, imagining we have hundreds of spectacular relationships when actually we have lots of well-wishers and acquaintances and few flesh and blood friends.
- We are entranced by one-way relationships, expending emotional energy as we bond with our favorite sitcom actor, sports star, or American Idol contestant.
- Friendship is wonderful, and we all want it. But friends can be hard to come by. This is nothing new. A true friend has always been one of God’s most sought after gifts. “Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love, but a faithful man who can find?” (Proverbs 20:6). Thankfully, the book of Proverbs says a lot about friendship. It won’t help you find friends, at least not directly. But Proverbs will help you be a better friend. And the best friends usually have the best friends.

In particular, Proverbs invites us to ask three questions relative to friendship: Are you fake? Are you foul? Or are you faithful?

Question 1: Are You a Fake Friend?

There is one defining characteristic of the phony friend in Proverbs: he uses people. The fake friend makes friends with people who can give him things. He establishes relationships solely for personal gain. In Proverbs this means money.

- “Wealth brings many new friends, but a poor man is deserted by his friend” (19:4).
- “The poor is disliked by his neighbor, but the rich has many friends” (14:20).
- “Many seek the favor of a generous man, and everyone is a friend to a man who gives gifts. All a poor man’s brothers hate him; how much more do his friends go

far from him! He pursues them with words, but does not have them” (19:6-7).

It’s hard to tell if Proverbs is making a moral judgment on those who cozy up to the rich. Certainly, part of the point is simply to show the privilege of the rich versus the poor. But I think we are meant to see the recognize the fickleness of these friends. Faithful friends are hard to find (Prov. 20:6). Fake friends come in abundance, and they come for your stuff.

Fake friends use people. Money is the example in Proverbs, but there are other ways to use people. Some people get close to pastors or politicians or athletes because they want access, power, or popularity. Others may be so accustomed to soliciting favors for business or school or church affairs that they can no longer tell when their personal charm is genuine and when it’s an act. None of us are immune to the dangers of friendship fakery. It’s possible to plug a book, or speak at a conference, or rave about a blog, or feign chumminess with a Christian mover-and-shaker and all the while wonder if you are doing this to receive the same treatment.

A few years ago I read [a book](#) about Billy Graham and the presidents. What struck me most was how these powerful men welcomed Graham into their lives because he seemed like the only person who didn’t want anything from them. History shows they often wanted something from Graham, but he gave them the gift of friendship without manipulation. He was no fake friend.

If I ever get into the business of writing fortune cookies, this will be one of my first ones: “Beware the friend who passes out back-scratchers. He does not have your best interest at heart.”

Question 2: Are You a Foul Friend?

Let me suggest three traits.

First, a foul friend is quick to criticize. In my opinion, there are two kinds of people that have the hardest time making friends. One is the person wants to have friends so badly she can’t understand what it means to be a friend. These people are socially unaware. They don’t ask questions. They see the relationship as a one way street. Everything about them screams “I’m an empty vessel ready for you to pour your love and affirmation and curiosity into me.”

The other type that has a hard time making friends is the super critical person. These people have an opinion on everything and must verbalize that opinion to everyone (probably bloggers!). More than just offering their opinion, they rain down a relentless barrage of negativity. “Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent” (Prov. 11:12).

A few weeks ago I was riding in a car with an older Christian man I’d never met before. I was

struck by the bridle he put on his tongue. He would ask me a question and when he saw that we might not completely agree, he'd simply say, "I see you've thought about that. I don't need to say anything more." He asked good questions and kept his thoughts to himself sharing them would have served no constructive purpose. Bad friends share every thought, however critical, as a means of self-expression. They don't think what their words are doing or whether they are necessary in this situation.

Consequently, the foul friend gets into conflict that could have been avoided. "Do not plan evil against your neighbor, who dwells trustingly beside you. Do not contend with a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm" (Prov. 3:29-30). It's all too easy to ruin friendships because we had a bad day. It's just as easy to get into a senseless argument because of our own jealousy, insensitivity, or hypersensitivity. Foul friends are quick to criticize.

Second, a foul friend is annoying. We're not talking personality or temperament. Some people rub us the wrong way. Fine. But other people are just plain rude. Rude, annoying people aren't aware of, or don't care about, social customs and cultural norms. This may seem like an innocent quirk, but the Bible calls it sin (1 Cor. 13:5).

Proverbs gives two concrete examples of annoyingness in action.

1) Being obnoxious. "Whoever blesses his neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing" (Prov. 27:14). Got it? Don't be the life of the party when you wake up. (Kids, this applies to you too.)

2) Not knowing your place. "Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house, lest he have his fill of you and hate you" (Prov. 25:17). If you're the sort of friend who comes over unannounced, never says please or thank you, always expects people to wait on you, and has no recognition of your role as a guest, then you're not the sort of friend people are looking for.

Third, a foul friend can't be trusted. This may mean you're a blatant liar (Prov. 23:10-11; 25:18). But duplicity can be more subtle. "Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, 'Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give'—when you have it with you" (Prov. 3:27-28). Foul friends don't keep their end of the bargain. They don't return favors. They don't give back what they borrow. They are slow to help and quick to look for ways to avoid being put upon. You can't trust them to keep their word.

Along the same lines, they are careless with their words. "Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death is the man who deceives his neighbor and says, 'I am only joking'" (Prov. 26:18-19). Words hurt after you launch them, no matter what you say your intention was. So be careful. If you don't care about the effect of your words, people won't trust you. And if you can't be trusted you won't be a very good friend.

Question Three: Are You a Faithful Friend

We see at least three characteristics of faithful friends in Proverbs.

First, a faithful friend is there in times of trouble. “Do not forsake your friend and your father’s friend, and do not go to your brother’s house in the day of a calamity. Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away” (Prov. 27:10). Given how important family is in the Old Testament, it is surprising that Proverbs would say don’t go to your brother’s house. The thought seems to be, “Don’t overlook your friends. They will be there for you every bit as much as your family will.” Contacts are good. Networking can be valuable. Having a plethora of acquaintances and well-wishers is nice. Racking up friends on Facebook is fine. But real friendship is proven in adversity (Prov. 17:17).

Fake friends go away when you’re in trouble. Faithful friends get better when times get harder. “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24). The next time you are in the midst of suffering and ask God, “What possible reason can there be for this trial?” consider one thing he may be up to is making your friendships sweeter and stronger.

Second, a faithful friend knows how to handle conflict. He doesn’t hold grudges. He doesn’t keep an open file in his brain marked “ways you’ve hurt me.” Keeping a long, detailed record of wrongs is like building friendships with a revolver under your coat. It’s no way to make friends, or keep them. “Be not a witness against your neighbor without cause, and do not deceive with your lips. Do not say, ‘I will do to him as he has done to me; I will pay the man back for what he has done’” (Prov. 24:28-29). Faithful friends never seek revenge. They are eager to overlook faults and quick to forgive. “The soul of the wicked desires evil; his neighbor finds no mercy in his eyes” (Prov. 21:10).

Part of handling conflict well is being slow to speak of your friends’ faults to others. “Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends” (Prov. 17:9). Good friends speak to someone, not around him. It’s amazing how many people we will talk when we have a personal conflict, but we avoid talking to the person with whom we have the conflict. It’s like driving in a round-about and never getting off (“Big Ben...Parliament”). Proverbs is right: “Argue your case with your neighbor himself, and do not reveal another’s secret, lest he who hears you brings shame upon you, and your ill repute have no end” (Prov. 25:9-10).

Third, faithful friends make each other better. “A man of violence entices his neighbor and leads him in a way that is not good” (Prov. 16:29). This is not the way of a good friend.

We've probably all had those friends that make us feel nobler and purer, and those friends that make you feel a little dirty and out of sorts. Bad company corrupts good character (1 Cor. 15:33). Your strongest relationships should be with those who lead you to Christ, not with those who draw you away. This is especially true when you are young or when you are outnumbered. Your deepest friendships should be gospel friendships.

Faithful friends help each other with their words. "Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel" (Prov. 27:9). The writer mentions two precious things in this proverb, oil and perfume, but neither are as precious as a wise friend. Go to your friends with your toughest predicaments and darkest secrets. Talk to them about sex and money and all the things we keep hidden. Get their advice before buying a house or taking a new job or getting married. The best friends combine their IQ's and get smarter as a result.

We all know the proverb: "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another" (Prov. 27:17). It's a great word picture. Ask yourself: am I sponge that never hurts anyone, but never helps much either? Am I a sword that cuts to the quick but also destroys? Or am I a stone, the kind of friend upon which others can be sharpened, made better and more mature? Faithful friends make better stones than sponges or swords.

Jesus Is a Friend

Of course, I'd be remiss if I didn't end this series by point us to the One to whom all Scripture points. "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). That means the greatest friend is the one who laid down the most for his friends. No question who this is.

To be sure, Jesus is more than a friend, but not less. He is the Divine Friend better than any other. He is never a fake friend, but always seeks our best. Neither is he a foul friend. He is slow to anger instead of quick to criticize. He is thoughtful and tender instead of annoying. He's always trustworthy and never lets us down. Best of all, Jesus is a faithful friend. He not only sympathizes and comforts you in trouble, he delivers you from your greatest trouble, which is sin. Not only does he speak the truth and handle conflict, he made peace through his blood when we were at enmity with him. And he doesn't just make us better, he makes us new. What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to him in prayer.