

Friendship

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[0 : 0 0] At home, we're just waiting for the invitation to arrive, the postman to come and for it to drop through the letterbox. And if we've nothing on, we probably will try to make it down, maybe get a cheap easy jet flight and make our way down to the capital.

You're wondering, what on earth is the minister on about? Well, I'm talking about the wedding, of course, William and Kate. We are just, as I say, waiting for the invitation to arrive at the manse.

I trust we won't be disappointed. Are you excited about this forthcoming event or perhaps as many seriously underwhelmed?

Did you see the interview that they gave on the day of the announcement? I thought they spoke well and certainly they seem to be very much in love, which is important.

Important, very important for a couple who are to be married. One thing that caught my attention of what William said was that their relationship was grounded on a solid friendship.

[1 : 1 1] His exact words, among others that he mentioned in reference to this theme of friendship, but his exact words were, being friends with one another is a massive advantage as they look forward to a life together.

Friendship is indeed a massive thing, and having friends is, for anybody, a massive advantage as we make our way through this life that we are given to live.

Friendship is a massive advantage. The Bible has a great deal to say on the subject. And I want to consider this evening one verse in particular that is found in the book of Proverbs.

Now, the reason my mind was drawn to this theme of friendship is that the weekend away for the young folk had that as its theme, friendship.

Now, the original speaker was not able to be there. I don't know if that theme was kept or if it changed. It was a different theme. So, all the better. You'll get something on friendship if you'd been waiting for it.

[2 : 1 6] And, well, here is an opportunity to hear something on that subject. The verse in question, as I say, is in Proverbs 18 and verse 24.

A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Proverbs, as we know, is part of what is known as the wisdom literature in the Bible and is poetic in form.

This particular verse, a man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. This particular verse is in a poetic form known as antithetical parallelism.

Now, that's a tough one to get out without stuttering. Really what it means isn't that complicated. It simply is recognizing that in this verse you have a first statement that parallels the second statement, but in an opposite or contrasting way.

Sometimes in Hebrew poetry there is a parallelism where the two parts are saying the same thing, but in a different way. But in this occasion they are saying, if not opposite things, certainly contrasting things.

[3 : 40] And on this occasion concerning this matter of friendship. A man of many companions. And indeed, the word there could quite legitimately be translated friends. A man of many friends may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

Both of the statements speak concerning friendship. But the first statement sounds a warning as to the limitations of friendship. While the second statement celebrates true friendship.

Perhaps what we could call a special friendship. Well, bearing this in mind, let's explore a little what lessons about friendship we can identify in this verse.

The first half, just to repeat and to be very clear on. The first part recognizing the limitations.

While the second identifying the preciousness of a special friendship. First of all then, the limitations of friendship. A man of many companions.

[4 : 47] A man of many friends. May come to ruin. There is a warning here that Solomon is addressing to us.

Perhaps those of us who are blessed with many friends. And Solomon is not saying that that is a bad thing. He's not saying that in and of itself it's a bad thing to have many companions.

Or as I have already noted, the word there can be translated as friends. That in and of itself is not a bad thing. But what he is warning us about is that having many friends.

Having many companions, if you wish. Is no cast iron protection against many problems. Or indeed ruin. A man of many companions may come to ruin.

Having many companions doesn't guarantee that all will be well. And that life will go well. And that you won't have any problems. No, even many companions can be the experience of one who comes to ruin.

[5 : 53] Solomon then recognizes the limitations of friendship. What are these limitations? In what way can having friends also bring with it limitations?

Or in what way can we speak of the limitations of friendship? Let me just give some suggestions that as we consider them could help us to have a better appreciation of what friendship is.

And indeed I trust help us to be better friends. First of all there's the matter of the depth of friendship. The very verse recognizes that there is a difference between quantity and quality.

A man may have many companions. But the implication seems to be that though he has many, they are not all deep friends. They are not all friends of the quality that one requires.

He has many of them. Great quantity. But not much in the way of quality. And of course that can be true of us. We can have many friends. We can have many companions.

[7 : 00] But the question to ask ourselves is what is the depth of the friendship that we enjoy with them? It's possible to have many superficial friendships.

In our Facebook generation some people have hundreds of friends. I have a modest 250. And I know that falls far short of some here in the audience who go way beyond that very modest number.

But how many of these friends are real friends? How many are the kind of friends that we need that are certainly spoken of or referred to by Solomon in what he goes on to say of a friend who sticks closer than a brother?

Friendship has its limitations as a function of the depth of the friendship that we have. Now in recognizing that we do have to be careful.

It would be wrong to conclude that for a friendship to be of any value it must be a very deep friendship. We all in life quite naturally and quite reasonably have different kinds or levels of friendship with different people.

[8 : 16] That in and of itself is not a bad thing. That's just the way it is. You know, even in church. And especially perhaps in a congregation like our own that is perhaps slightly larger than the average.

It is unreasonable. It would be a foolish thing to imagine that we could be friends with everybody. That we could enjoy a deep meaningful friendship with everybody who is part of this congregation.

That simply isn't going to happen. It's not meant to happen. We don't have the same level of friendship with everybody. Jesus himself.

He had his disciples. He's his twelve disciples. His twelve friends. He had other friends. But he had this particular group of twelve friends. But even among that relatively small group of twelve friends, we know that there were three.

Peter, James, and John. With whom there was a deeper bond of friendship. They were his best friends, you might say. And even among those three, it would seem that John was the one who was closest in friendship to Jesus.

[9 : 25] Jesus loved them all equally, as he loves us all equally. But among the disciples, Jesus, as the man, had friends. He had best friends.

And he had, in John, this beloved friend. If that was true of Jesus, certainly we would be surprised if it were not true of us also.

So, while we recognize that all our friends will not, nor should they be, intimate friends, we will be in difficulty in this life that we have to live if all our friendships lack depth.

If all of them are superficial, perhaps not even superficial, but if all of them lack the depth of close, deep friendship. We do need special or close friends, best friends.

And that, of course, is true within the church family that we are part of. Now, that is a challenge for us here in Bonacore. Again, God has blessed us with a reasonably sized congregation, but it does present for us that challenge.

[10 : 32] It is possible for somebody to participate, to be present here in the church services Sunday after Sunday, and yet never to develop meaningful friendships with others.

We say hello, we say goodbye, we say how are you, we know a little bit about each other, but if we were honest, we'd have to say, well, friends, friendship, not really.

That is a challenge for us, for we all need friends, and how much more within the community of faith. So that is one limitation of friendship, the depth of the friendship that we experience.

There's also the fluidity of friendship, if we can speak in those terms. Friendships change. We drift apart. Changing circumstances make the cultivating or preserving of friendship difficult.

Those of us who are a little older can look back on our lives and can imagine or remember very close friends that we had, perhaps as when we were children or teenagers or students.

[11 : 35] And though we may still describe them as our friends, the reality is that we've drifted apart. We're not in touch. We don't make the effort to keep in touch. And even if we did meet up, it just wouldn't be the same.

Sometimes a friendship is so deep that even after a great absence, you connect or you click when you meet again. But that is not always the case. It is, in fact, seldom the case.

Friendships change. They grow, but they also can decline. There is this limitation in friendship. Solomon is wanting to warn us about this, for us to be aware of this.

A man of many companions, a man of many friends, can still come to ruin. The having of many friends doesn't guarantee that all will be well.

Be careful, says Solomon. Don't lean too much on that which can give way beneath you. But then also, as we think of the limitation of friendships, we have to recognize that there is the fallibility of friends.

[12 : 41] We can describe it in that way. Friends, even close friends, can let us down. Of course, we, as friends, can let down others. We are all selfish creatures.

And that selfishness, which is so difficult for us to gain dominion over, that selfishness that rears its ugly head so often in our lives and in our relationships, that selfishness can destroy, can threaten a friendship, even close friendships.

And that can be a very painful experience. Listen to the psalmist, the heartfelt, pained words of the psalmist as he describes such an experience to us in Psalm 55, in verses 12 to 14.

If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it. If a foe were raising himself against me, I could hide from him. But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God.

The pain that he experiences because one who had been his friend, one who had been his close friend, his intimate friend, has let him down, has let him down.

[14 : 06] And that, of course, is a painful experience. Solomon warns us, be careful. Don't rely on, don't rest on friends as being your ultimate security for friends are fallible, even if you have many of them.

Thank God for your friends. Thank God if you have many of them. But don't place all your confidence in them. And certainly let us be careful, lest we be the ones who let down others.

But then as we think of the limitation of friendship, maybe just one further thing to mention, and it is a reality of the world that we live in, this fallen world, and it is the mortality of friends.

This is a further limitation on human friendship that is simply in the nature of things in our fallen world where death has become a reality.

And if we depend entirely on a special friend, if our life revolves around one friend that we have, perhaps a husband or a wife or a close friend, if all of our life revolves around that person, if they are our be-all and end-all, then we are vulnerable to the devastation that can result from losing that special friend.

[15 : 26] So, friendship has many limitations and no doubt others could be identified. But Solomon goes on. He not only recognizes that friendship has its limitations, a man of many companions may come to ruin, but he then contrasts that with a very positive affirmation of a true and deep friendship.

But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. The preciousness of a special friendship. It's very clear that Solomon is no hardened cynic who has lost faith in the possibility of friendship.

He speaks of and describes here a truly deep friend. Now, in a moment, we will think about the identity of that friend for ourselves. And it is no great riddle or will be no surprising revelation.

But as we think of the one who wrote these words, and we have reason to believe that it was Solomon, it may well be that he was describing a real-life friend that he enjoyed and valued.

We will notice how in the light of the full revelation of Scripture we can identify this friend in another way. But for Solomon, it may well be that this was somebody who was a real-life friend that allowed him to express himself in this way, having experienced the joy and the thrill and the experience of such a friendship.

- [16 : 57] What are the characteristics of such a friend that are described here? This friend who sticks closer than a brother. What can we say about such a friend? Well, this friend is a friend who is there to protect from trouble and indeed in trouble.

We can draw that from the parallelism. If it is true that many companions may still not protect us from ruin, Solomon says, but there is that special friend who will be there to protect you, who will be there to help you, who will be there in the midst of the trouble.

What will that protection involve? How can we protect those whom we love? Well, often it will involve something that often can only be done in the context of a trusting friendship.

It involves warning. It involves rebuking a friend, warning them from not doing that which will harm them, not doing that which will bring pain into their lives.

In the book of Proverbs itself, friendship is described, or one of the features of friendship is described in that way. If you notice in Proverbs 27, and verse 6, and then verse 9, wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

- [18 : 17] Then in verse 9, perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of one's friend springs from his earnest counsel. The true friend is the one who will rebuke, a friend who is going astray, who will warn when he sees that he is going in a direction that will bring harm and pain to his life, who will be willing to say, what you are doing is wrong.

The life that you are living is one that is not pleasing to God. You are falling into sin. Be careful. Be warned. If we aren't close friends, then we might say, well, I better not say anything.

They'll be offended. They won't take it well. I'll just be quiet. But a true friend will be willing to risk, if you wish, that rejection. The true friend protects the one he loves from trouble, and indeed in trouble.

It involves rescuing when the trouble has indeed come upon our friend. And again, in Proverbs, something of that is mentioned for us in chapter 17.

In verse 17, a friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity. These are the features, the characteristics of this special friend of whom Solomon speaks.

- [19 : 38] Well, what about us? Let's just pause for a moment and invite you to pause for a moment. What kind of friend are you? Do you show your friendship in this way? Are we sometimes cowardly friends who prefer to say nothing even when we know that it is right and necessary to speak?

Are we fair-weather friends that when things get difficult we disappear from the picture? But this friend of whom Solomon speaks is also one who is there for us and close to us.

The language of the verse is very clear. He is the friend who sticks closer than a brother. He sticks closer than a brother. Those who know about these things tell us that this is the language that could be used to describe metals being welded together to the point of being practically inseparable.

Sticking closer to one. The friend who sticks closer is a friend who knows you as you really are. The one you are able to open up to. The one with whom you can share your joys and your sadness, your fears and your doubts.

The kind of friend described is a friend who can be trusted. Such a friend knows you and is with you. Again, the language of sticks closer points to one who is there for you.

- [21 : 01] I was in Edinburgh last week and as I walked to get the bite of lunch on Friday, I walked past the statue there of Greyfriars Bobby.

We know the story of that great friend of his owner who was his shadow. Even in death, he was there for him. Now clearly there isn't an exact parallel to what we're speaking about, but this idea of sticking close at all times and in every circumstance, that's the kind of friend that Solomon is speaking of.

The friend who sticks closer than a brother. Is that the kind of friend you are? If we think back to where we began, thinking of the royal engagement and as we think of marriage, certainly we could apply these characteristics of friendship to the kind of friendship that it is necessary to develop and cultivate between a husband and a wife.

I'm not saying that's the only space, if you wish, or context in which this kind of friendship can be developed, but it's certainly very appropriate in that context of marriage, a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

But let's move on briefly and just ask the question for ourselves here this evening as we listen to what is said, there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

[22 : 24] Let's just pause for a moment and ask concerning the identity of this special friend for us. I would imagine that there would be many who on even considering this matter of friendship, there would be many if they were honest, would say, well, where can I find such a friend?

I've already suggested that when Solomon wrote these words, he was no doubt or quite possibly thinking of a real life friend that he had. I've also just suggested that the description given can be applied to the friendship that can be found, that we would wish to be found in a healthy marriage.

But we can, of course, in the light of the fuller revelation of Scripture, legitimately identify this friend who sticks closer than a brother, this friend par excellence, not to the exclusion of other friends, but this friend above all friends, this friend who is able to grant such friendship to all who seek it and all who stand in need of it.

This friend, and this will be no surprise for you, this friend is called Jesus. He is the friend who sticks closer than any brother. Remember what we've said about the characteristics of this friend.

He is the one who protects us from trouble and in trouble. And, of course, this is what Jesus has done for us. He gave His life to rescue us from the deep trouble we were in because of our sin.

[23 : 53] He died to show the depth of His friendship for His own. In the words of John in the beginning of chapter 13 of his gospel, as he describes the impending death of Jesus, he speaks of Jesus loving His own to the end, to the uttermost, loving His own, loving His friends, loving those who He knew were part of His inner circle, and that inner circle for Jesus can be a multitude.

When we think of an inner circle, we think of a small group, but for Jesus that could be a multitude. He loved them. He loved His own. He loved them to the end to protect them from trouble, to rescue them from their own sin and guilt, to rescue them from a lost eternity.

And Jesus, as that friend who sticks closer than a brother, continues to protect us in time of trouble. He has pronounced this promise to His own. I am with you always to the end of the age.

I am with you always. I will be there for you. I am there for you. We spoke of this special friend as being one who provides protection, but also intimacy.

He sticks closer. And the Bible teaches that as Christians, Jesus Christ indwells us. Remember the words of the apostle Paul, I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.

[25 : 30] What greater intimacy could we speak of? What greater description of one who sticks closer than a brother? He indwells us while we are described as those who are in Him.

We as believers in Jesus Christ are in Christ. Jesus is willing to be that friend who sticks closer than a brother. And will you have Him as your friend?

Which brings us to the final point that we want to just mention. How are you to respond to His offer of friendship? Jesus invites you today, Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

I will give you a welcome. I will give you friendship. Will you come? How can I come, you ask? Well, listen to Jesus speaking on the nature of friendship with Himself.

Listen to Jesus speaking on the nature of intimacy with Himself. We read in Matthew's Gospel in chapter 12 from verse 46, While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, His mother and brother stood outside wanting to speak to Him.

[26 : 42] Someone told Him, Your mother and brothers are standing outside wanting to speak to you. He replied to Him, Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? Pointing to His disciples, pointing to His friends, He said, Here are my mother and my brothers, for whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.

How can we respond to His offer of friendship? What are we to do that we might be friends of Jesus, to be a friend of Jesus, to be in that inner familial circle?

We must do the will of the Father. This is what Jesus tells us. And what would the Father have us do? What would the Father have you do? Well, what the Father would have you do above all else is that you would honor Jesus, that you would trust in Jesus, that you would bow down and worship before Jesus.

This is the will of the Father for your life. This is the manner in which we must respond to His offer of friendship. friendship. And I would invite you so to do if you have not yet done so.

Put your trust in Jesus and discover in Jesus that friend who sticks closer than any brother. Many of us, by grace and grace alone, have already discovered in Jesus that friend who sticks closer than a brother.

[28 : 13] And we have a duty, an opportunity, a privilege of developing that friendship. And allow me to close by quoting a heartwarming and helpful exhortation from the pen of Charles Bridges, the 19th century, late 18th, 19th century Anglican preacher.

Preacher. He addresses us in this way in regard to this matter and indeed in regard to this very verse. Oh, let him, let Jesus, be the first choice of youth, the tried and chosen friend of maturing age, the friend for eternity.

Cultivate a closer acquaintance with Him. Set the highest value upon His friendship. Live a life of joyous confidence on His all-sufficiency and love.

Make Him the constant subject of conversation. Avoid whatsoever is displeasing to Him. Be found in the places where He meets His people. Long to be with Him forever.

This testify to all around. This is my beloved. This is my friend. Jesus is my beloved. Jesus is my friend.

[29 : 35] Let us pray. We come before You, our Father in Heaven, and we thank You that You are a God who offers us Your friendship. And this in itself is a marvelous thing.

It is a thing difficult for us to understand. How can it be? How can it be that the living and true God, the Creator of the universe, the altogether righteous, altogether Holy One, how can such a God be interested in friendship with the likes of us, and yet it is so.

And for this we thank You. We thank You for that most special expression of Your love and friendship towards us in the person of Your Son, Jesus Christ. And we thank You that in Him we do indeed have a friend who sticks closer than any brother.

Help us to recognize that this is so. Help us to receive of that friendship, to respond to that invitation, and help us those who by grace know Jesus as not only our Lord and Savior, but yes, even as our friend, that we might be able to cultivate that friendship, that we would be loyal friends, that we would learn what friendship is from Him, and that we might display that friendship to others.

Indeed, that we would invite others that they too might enjoy this friendship with the Savior. And these things we pray in His name. Amen. We'll close our service this evening by singing, and we'll sing the verses that were sung earlier this evening in Psalm 36.

[31 : 21] And sing Psalms, it's on page 44. Psalm 36, verses 5 to 9. Your steadfast love is great, O Lord, it reaches heaven high. Your faithfulness is wonderful, extending to the sky.

Psalm 36, verses 5 to 9. The tune is Rachel, and we'll stand to sing. your faithfulness is wonderful, it reaches heaven high.

Your faithfulness is wonderful, extending to the sky.

Your righteous love is loving great, like mountains dim and sea.

Your justice is like ocean depths, both land and peace. Your peace you keep.

[32 : 37] How precious is your steadfast love, what confidence it brings.

both high and low, my shadow will, the shadow of your wings.

May this will lift your heart and drain from sins of your delight.

For in your hands the source of light, in your light we see light.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always. Amen.