

# The Power of Friends

Selected Proverbs

CBC Sun a.m., Aug 23, 2009

**ENGAGE:** These last couple of weeks we've definitely been experiencing the "dog days of summer," with the hot searing heat. Yesterday, was a nice respite from that heat. Besides the cooler weather many who helped with the kid's camp and/or VBS enjoyed a relaxing time of visiting with one another out at Dave and Annette Markle's.

This reminds me of what **Samuel Taylor Coleridge** wrote shortly before his death in *Youth and Age* in which he reflected over his past and the strength of his earlier years. In this work, Coleridge wrote, "**Friendship is a sheltering tree.**"

Charles Swindoll commenting on this said, "How true—how terribly true! When the searing rays of **adversity's sun burn** their way into our day, there's nothing quite like a sheltering tree—a true friend—to give us relief in its cool shade. Its **massive trunk of understanding** gives security as its **thick leaves of love** wash over our faces and wipe our brows. Beneath its branches have rested many a discouraged soul!"

It was the German poet, Goethe [GO tah] who wrote: The world is so empty if one thinks only of mountains, rivers, and cities; **but to KNOW someone who thinks and feels with me**, and who, though distant is **close** to me in spirit, **this makes the earth for me an inhabited garden.**"

**FOCUS:** The book of Proverbs reminds us of the power, the influence that friends can have upon us. As many of young people return to school how important for you to be cautious in your friendships.

**SET THE STAGE biblically:** Throughout much of the summer we've been noting Solomon's wise counsel to us from the book of Proverbs. We've considered areas such as the wise parent, the wise father/mother; the marital relationship and moral purity; wise advice on leadership; wise speech. Now in this message and next week's sermon we're going to look at this important area of friendship. **Next week** we'll look at three ways you can be a redemptive friend, a friend that has a positive influence on those around you.

**PREVIEW: You and I need friends.** God created us to be involved in community. Each of us needs friends to help us through the difficult times. **Second**, we are going to see that while each of us needs friends, we must **choose our friends carefully**. While friends can be powerful forces of good in our lives, the wrong friends can easily lead us down the wrong paths and bring great harm to us.

**ANNOUNCE the passage:** For the Scripture reading turn with me in your Bibles to Prov 1:10-19 [p. 560].

Isn't it interesting that when something occurs in your life and you are alone you pick up the phone and call a friend. You want to connect with someone else. Few things are more lonely than going through a sudden test or joy and having no friend to call.

## God recognizes that you and I need friends.

God created us to be involved in a community. Each of us needs friends to help us through the difficult times. All of us need someone who helps lighten our load, someone who knows our

struggles and burdens and comes alongside to help lighten our load, someone who sympathizes with us, someone who **confronts us** when we need to be corrected, someone who says the tough things we need to hear, but who says them in love. **Each of us needs friends to help us through the difficult times.**

Some of you may feel like you are in dead-end jobs. Some of you may see yourself as a failed husband or father. Some of you battle depression. You have difficulty recognizing the hope you have in God.

Others of you may **feel exhausted** from your duties in the home or at work. Some of you **feel desperately alone** as you carry out responsibilities as a parent of young children. You are starving for adult conversation and a sympathetic ear. Others of you are going through **difficult, major adjustments**. Some of you may be moving from career track to mommy track. Some are struggling with fertility. Still others are fighting chronic illnesses or experiencing marital strife.

**Each of us desperately needs redemptive friendships; that is, friendships that build one another up.** Sometimes those most in need are those who appear mature, balanced, and always in control.

**\*\*When you are the needy one, as we all are at times, allow others to demonstrate that same loyal love to you that a brother or sister shows to his or her family member in need. Perhaps you have heard people say, "I really don't need friends; I have the Lord." While that sounds spiritual, it's not biblical. God created us to live in community with one another. We need others in our life to be all that God wants us to be, and others need us!**

So let's be humble, acknowledge our need, and then be grateful to God for His provision of faithful redemptive friendships. And then let's demonstrate loyal love to others in their times of greatest need. **Show the same loyal love that you would as if they were your own family member.** Be a loyal friend. SLIDE: "A friend loves at all times, and a relative is born to help in adversity" (Prov 17:17 NET). [B.SLIDE]

ILL: Out of the furnaces of war come many true stories of sacrificial friendship. One such story tells of two friends in World War I, who were inseparable. They had enlisted together, trained together, were shipped overseas together, and fought side-by-side in the trenches. During an attack, one of the men was critically wounded in a field filled with barbed wire obstacles, and he was unable to crawl back to his foxhole. The entire area was under a withering enemy crossfire, and it was suicidal to try to reach him. Yet his friend decided to try. Before he could get out of his own trench, his sergeant yanked him back inside and ordered him not to go. "It's too late. You can't do him any good, and you'll only get yourself killed."

A few minutes later, the officer turned his back, and instantly the man was gone after his friend. A few minutes later, he staggered back, mortally wounded, with his friend, now dead in his arms. The sergeant was both angry and deeply moved. "What a waste," he blurted out. He's dead and you're dying. It just wasn't worth it."

With almost his last breath, the dying man replied, "Oh, yes, it was, Sarge. When I got to him, the only thing he said was, 'I knew you'd come, Jim!'"

One of the true marks of a friend is that he is there when there is every reason for him not to be, when to be there is sacrificially costly. [Cf. Gary Inrig, *Quality Friendship*, quoted by Swindoll in *Tale of the Tardy Oxcart*, 222.] A friend loves at all times, showing the same loyal love that one would for their own family member.

God intends relationships and friendships to be the context in which He does some of His most important work in our lives. Life is difficult from any perspective, and **each of us needs friends to help us through the difficult times.** If you say you don't need or want friends you have a deeper problem. God made us to be in relationship with one another. God tells us to care for one another; love one another; be kind to one another; encourage one another. If we do not engage and reach out in relationship to others, if we seek to live in isolation, something is blocking the God-given desire and need for community. We need to identify **why** we are living in isolation from others.

**ILL: Do you realize your need for close friends?** Some of you have been hurt by people close to you, or as you have reached out to others. And in a desire to protect yourself, some of you have withdrawn and think the possibility of being hurt again makes the price of friendship too high. **Paul Simon** wrote the following lyrics that describes the hurt that may cause us to withdraw from one another, but also the loss we experience when we do:

“Don't talk of love, I've heard the word before;  
It's sleeping in my memory of feelings that have died.  
“I have no need of friendship, friendship causes pain.  
If I never loved, I never would have cried.”  
I am a rock; I am an island.  
I have my books and my poetry to protect me.  
Shielded in my armor, Hiding in my room,  
Deep within my womb, I touch no one and no one touches me.  
I am a rock; I am an island.”

While our natural tendency often is to withdraw when we've been hurt by others, we are the ultimate losers. **God created us to be involved in a community.** We lose when we fail to reach out to those around us.

**ILL: George Mason's life centered in his business.** He lived alone, and on this Christmas refused all invitations. On Christmas Eve, after his employees left, he went into the office vault to get a little extra cash. Soundlessly, on newly oiled hinges, the great door swung shut behind him. Sudden darkness and the final click of the automatic lock startled him into panic. Desperately he pounded on the door. Then he realized no one would hear him. Everyone was gone, even the cleaning women. Surely he could make it overnight, he consoled himself. Then he remembered that the next day was not a working day, it was Christmas! His heart pounding with fear, he wondered if he would have enough air. It was a new vault. Hadn't he heard something about a “safety hole”? Feeling around in the darkness he finally located it at the top of the back wall—too small for burglars but enough for air.

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day passed. He was alone, as he had planned. But **he was uncomfortable, hungry and thirsty** in darkness so dense he could almost feel it brushing his face. The day after Christmas the chief cashier arrived and unlocked the vault, but did not open the door. Without anyone seeing him, George Mason staggered out and tottered to the water cooler. Then he took a taxi to his solitary apartment and freshened up. **Back at the office, nobody had missed him.** Nobody even asked him how he had spent Christmas. He had missed

Christmas because nobody at all missed him. After that experience, he placed a card high on the wall of the vault to remind him. It read, **“To love people, to be indispensable somewhere, that is the purpose of life. THAT is the secret of happiness.”**

**Trans:** God created us to be involved in a community. “No man is an island.” We need one another. Now while we need friends to help us through difficult times, **choose your friends carefully.** This is the major lesson on friendship I want to emphasize today to you from Proverbs. **God recognizes that you and I need friends, but:**

## **Choose your friends carefully.**

**Choose your friends wisely because you will become like those with whom you spend time.** God warns you and me again and again in the book of Proverbs: Recognize the influence that friends can have upon you and choose your friends carefully.” Who you choose as close friends powerfully affects your life. **Note with me Solomon’s observation about the power of friends in Prov 13:20 (NKJV):** *“He who walks with wise men will be wise, But the companion of fools will be destroyed.”*

APPL: For some of you, as parents you are concerned because of with whom your child is hanging around. Some of you perhaps fear you will receive a call or visit some night from a police officer informing you that you son or daughter has been killed in an auto accident.

Now when Solomon talks about **walking** with wise people he’s talking about **associating** with them. Spending time with wise people helps you grow in wisdom. Do you want to see and respond to life from God’s point of view? Do you want to experience the blessing of living a life pleasing to God? Get involved with people who are living wisely. Move in the same direction they do.

On the other hand, if you hang out with wrong friends you will suffer harm. Solomon notes that “The one who associates with the wise grows wise, **but a companion of fools suffers harm**” (Prov 13:20 NET). Your friends and companions can influence you for good or for evil. Therefore, **choose your close friends carefully because foolish friends will tend to lead you astray.** Not all friends are beneficial to us. Solomon warns us: SLIDE: “A person who has friends may be harmed by them” (Prov 18:24a NET). BLANK SLIDE [Note NKJV uses Greek translation either rather than the Hebrew text, see fn of NKJV, “may come to ruin.”]

Young people, so much of your future blessing or heartache, God’s favor or the reproofs of life, depends on whom you choose as your friends. **If your friends don’t have good character, if they don’t have God’s value system, don’t remain close friends with them.**

The apostle Paul warns us: SLIDE: “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company corrupts good morals’” (1 Cor 15:33 NET). Blank Slide

ILL: Why is this so important that you don’t become close friends with someone who is not a person of good character? You will be led down a path that will bring harm and destruction upon you. How quickly the wrong friends can influence you and lead you down a path that brings much misery and sorrow. One high school student began lifting weights with one of his fellow classmates. Within two weeks this “friend” had introduced this student to pot, which led him down a path that brought much heartache into his life. **CHOOSE YOUR FRIENDS CAREFULLY!**

APPL: Since God warns us that the companion of fools will be destroyed **how do you recognize someone who is a fool?** How can you tell if that close friend at school or at work is wise or foolish?

A foolish person values his or her own opinions more than the wisdom and instruction of God and those in authority over him or her. **Fools are determined to run their own lives rather than recognizing their accountability to God for their actions.** Solomon notes: SLIDE: “Fearing the Lord is the beginning of moral knowledge, but **fools despise wisdom and instruction**” (Prov 1:7 NET). Blank Slide The fool is determined to run his or her own life rather than following God’s directions. You don’t want to be influenced by the fool.

Fools are naïve and without discernment and therefore **find themselves in trouble constantly.** SLIDE: “A shrewd person sees danger and hides himself, but the naive keep right on going and suffer for it” (Prov 22:3 NET). Blank Slide

**“A fool is a person who crosses the streets of life without looking both ways.** He forges ahead into moral and spiritual danger, stumbling through life from one crisis to another. Fools are not without intelligence, but they are without moral and spiritual sensibilities because they have never learned to fear the Lord.” [D. Jeremiah, *Powerful Principles from Proverbs*, 69.]

APPL [cf. Jeremiah]: **Why is it important for you not to choose fools for friends? You will become just like them.** This is important for all of us to know, but especially for you young people during the years when peer pressure is so great.

**As Christians we are not supposed to live like isolationists, walling ourselves off from those who need Christ.** If we choose to be around only Christians and mature spiritual people, how will the Gospel ever spread to those who need to hear it? It is fine to have casual friendships with those who are not wise, but not committed friendships. It is when we begin to open ourselves up to others on a committed level that we are likely to be influenced to become like them. **To have a committed relationship with someone who doesn’t believe in God the way you do is to invite trouble.** SLIDE “Adulterers, do you not know that friendship with the world means hostility toward God? So whoever decides to be the world’s friend makes himself God’s enemy.” **James 4:4 NET** Blank SLIDE

Stories abound of people who let their guard down for a moment and found their lives changed forever as a result of associating with unsavory people. Now you might be tempted to build friendships with unwise people thinking you can change them. But the changes always work both ways—you will both be changed.

**Sometimes a Christian marries a non-Christians thinking,** “I will change my spouse after the marriage.” Let me warn you now, **it rarely happens. Everyone is on their best behavior during courtship, and after marriage the mountain of unbelief looms larger than it did before.**

**Don’t make committed friendships with fools.** Look for faithful friends; friends that will help build you up; friends that will help you be more like Christ. Be cautious in your friendship. SLIDE: “The righteous person is cautious in his friendship, but the way of the wicked leads them astray” (Prov 12:26 NET).B SLIDE

APPL: Students, as you prepare to head back to school or head off to college choose your friends carefully because you become like those with whom you spend time. **Don’t hang around the party crowd.** SLIDE: “Do not spend time among drunkards, among those who eat too much meat, <sup>23:21</sup> because drunkards and gluttons become impoverished, and drowsiness clothes them

with rags” (Prov 23:20-21 NET). BLANK SLIDE Avoid the party crowd. Their wasteful, indulgent lifestyle leads to poverty.

By taking heed to God’s instruction in this area you show yourself to be a person of discernment. If you hang around the wrong people you ultimately bring shame to your parents. SLIDE: “The one who keeps the law is a discerning child, but a companion of gluttons brings shame to his parents” (Prov 28:7 NET). B SLIDE

Another person to avoid hanging around is the person who is always getting angry and blowing up over everything. SLIDE: “Do not make friends with an angry person, and do not associate with a wrathful person, <sup>22:25</sup> lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare” (Prov 22:24-25 NET). BLANK SLIDE God warns us not to make friends with people characterized by anger, meaning the anger is not a rare occurrence with them. Don’t associate with those that are easily angered.

**APPL:** I think back to a man I worked for during part of the summer after my freshman year of college. He was a cement contractor who poured foundations. The man had a violent temper. I recall one incident where, in his anger, he threw his hammer across the foundation at his son who was on the other side. A reminder as well, to us as parents, that while all of us may have times when we get angry, the importance that we control our anger, and if we do respond in an inappropriate way, the importance that we go back and ask forgiveness, not only to God but also those that we responded to in the wrong way.

Other people God warns us to avoid are those who break the law, those who sin against society, commit social injustices, and crimes. Don’t be friends with those trying to get you to do wrong. SLIDE: “A violent person entices his neighbor, and leads him down a path that is terrible” (Prov 16:29 NET). BLANK SLIDE Avoid those who would lead you down a path of crime and violence. In Prov 1:10-19 Solomon warns, “Don’t follow those who try to lead you into crime and violence. You will be the ultimate loser....

**Reit/Trans:** We’ve seen that all of us need friends, but also God warns us: **Choose your friends carefully because you will become like those with whom you spend time.** Now as we think about our need to choose our friends carefully there is a question we must deal with.

## Should I ever be friends with an unbeliever?

As we have already noted God repeatedly warns us in Proverbs against associating with the morally corrupt. Does this mean that as a Christian we can never have non-Christian friends?

How do we balance God’s command to go to all people groups and disciple them for Christ with the counsel given to us here in Proverbs to be careful with whom we associate? If we only hang around Christians and those who are wise, how are we going to influence those who don’t know Christ?

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers: SLIDE: “I wrote you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people. <sup>5:10</sup> In no way did I mean the immoral people of this world, or the greedy and swindlers and idolaters, since you would then have to go out of the world” (1 Cor 5:9-10 NET). BLANK SLIDE

While God does not want you or me to have friendships that draw us away from Him, God does want you and me to reach out to those around us that don’t know Christ. God doesn’t want you

and me to live our lives insulated and isolated from all contact with unbelievers. This approach is both unrealistic to life and unfaithful to God. God has called us to be salt and light in the world.

**ILL:** A research study [reported in Church Growth: American Magazine] shows the importance of friendship in the process of making disciples. The study identified **240 new Christians who were actively involved in their churches**. A second group of 240 people were identified as drop-outs—they had made a recent decision but had since lapsed into inactivity. A third group of 240 people were identified as those who had been presented with the Gospel message, but had chosen not to make a positive decision.

In 720 individual interviews, each was asked to classify the person who had presented the Gospel into one of three categories: 1) Friend, 2) Salesman, or 3) Teacher. The results provided some startling conclusions: **94% of the people who saw the church member as a “friend” were now Christians and active in their churches**. On the other hand, 71% of those people who saw the church member who presented the Gospel as a “salesman” made an initial decision, but soon dropped out. Finally, those who saw the church member as a “teacher” generally tended to not respond at all—84% said “no thanks.”

The implications are clear. **The non-Christian person who perceives your relationship as one of a “friend” is far more likely to eventually respond to Christ’s love than the person who sees you either as a “teacher”—instructing on doctrine, sin, and morality; or as a “salesman”—manipulating them toward an eventual decision.** [Cf. Win Arn & Charles Arn, *The Master’s Plan for Making Disciples*, 105f.]

People long to be a part of a community who will care for them. May God help us to demonstrate that care to one another. Get involved in biblical community—smaller groups of Christians for fellowship, exhortation, encouragement. At the same time we also need to reach out to those without Christ.

**Jesus set an example** of what it means to be a “friend of sinners” for the purpose of reaching out to them with the good news. SLIDE: “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming to hear him. <sup>15:2</sup> But the Pharisees and the experts in the law were complaining, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:1-2 NET). BLANK SLIDE Jesus love for sinners caused him to build bridges to people.

**APPL:** In your relationship to non-believers then, here’s a question that can help you know if you are being a redemptive friend to your unbelieving friend or if you need to break off the friendship. Ask yourself this question: **“Is this friendship or association drawing my unbelieving friend to God, it is this friendship drawing me away from God?”** Is my friend being exposed and potentially drawn to the light, or am I being drawing to the darkness?

REIT/TRANS: God created us to enjoy friendships with one another. We need one another. **Second**, we’ve seen that in our need for friendship, we need to be cautious that we don’t become close friends with those that will pull us away from our walk with Christ.

## Conclusion

Now to make and have friends, you have to **be a friend**. Take the initiative and introduce yourself to others. **Reach out and be the kind of person you would like others to be toward you**. In the game of forming friendships, the next move is always yours. To use biblical language, you reap what you sow (Galatians 6:7). Especially, I believe, when it comes to

adversity and crisis. If you have shown yourself to be faithful you usually find others being faithful to you.

**ILL: Dale Carnegie** once said, “You can make more friends in two months by becoming really interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you. Which is just another way of saying that the way to make a friend is to be one.” **G.K. Chesterton** used to say, “The truly great person is the one who makes every person feel great.” Jesus instructs us: “**Treat others in the same way that you would want them to treat you**” (Luke 6:31 NET).

**ILL:** The following illustration reveals the accuracy of these statements. In Queen Victoria’s time, a young woman had the good fortune of being escorted to dinner by **William E. Gladstone**, who was considered one of the most brilliant statesmen of the 19th century. On the following evening, the same young lady was escorted by **Benjamin Disraeli**, novelist, statesman and twice prime minister of Great Britain.

When asked for her impression of these two great rivals, she replied, “**After an evening with Gladstone, I thought he was the most brilliant man I’d ever met. After an evening with Disraeli, I thought myself to be the most fascinating woman in the world!**” [Cf. Living Word Lifeline.]

Trans: The last part of **Proverbs 18:24** says, “there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” Solomon’s point is that **in contrast to false friends** [cf. 24a., “A person who has friends may be harmed by them”] **some friends can be more faithful than our closest blood relatives.** Such a friend is a true treasure. If you have such a friendship value that, cultivate it. Thank God for it!

If friendship is a sheltering tree, beneath whose branches are *you* refreshed? Or dare I ask, who rests beneath *yours*?

Let’s recognize the need we have to live in community with one another. **We need one another.** We need the shelter of one another’s encouragement, and at times we also need the corrective branch in the hand of a loving friend. **Who would God have you to reach out to? Who could use refreshment beneath your sheltering branch? To whom could you show loyal, Christlike love?**

Now I have no doubt that in an audience this size **some of you need to rethink some of your relationships.** The tree under which you are resting rather than bringing true spiritual refreshment, threatens to topple down upon you. As the storms of life howl around you, you stand in imminent danger because of who you are confiding in.

Perhaps, in a desire to meet the need of loneliness, you’ve gotten involved with someone who’s not a good influence upon you. You need to break off that relationship. Remember Jesus said you can’t be a friend of the world and a friend of God. Loyalty to Christ must take precedence and direct all of our other relationships. Take God’s warning to heart and avoid wrong friendships that pull you away from God. As you cultivate your relationship with Christ and reach out to others, God can provide friends that will help lift you up rather than pull you down.

Now for us as Christians, when we think of a friend that sticks closer than a brother we are reminded of Jesus Christ in terms of His loyalty to us. All human friendships are ultimately secondary, derived from God’s friendship toward us, His people. Jesus revealed His friendship toward us by laying down His life for us. **Let’s keep cultivating our friendship with Jesus Christ.** This is the wisest and most redemptive of all actions.

**SALVATION: Do you know Jesus as your friend?** Jesus has promised to be a friend forever to those who have reached out in faith to Him as their Savior. Jesus invites you, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>11:29</sup> Take my yoke on you and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt 11:28-29 NET).