

GODLY WISDOM - FRIENDSHIP

(Proverbs 12.26, 17.17, 22.11, 23.20-21, 27.6 and 27.9)

Introduction

I'm going to read three quotes. One is from John Lennon, one is from Jennifer Aniston and one is from Winnie the Pooh. See if you can guess who said what...

Quote number 1: "There's nothing like a really loyal, dependable, good friend. Nothing."

Quote number 2: "If you live to be a hundred, I want to live to be a hundred minus one day, so I never have to live without you."

And quote number 3: "Being honest may not get you a lot of friends, but it'll always get you the right ones."

Well, I'll put you out of your misery. "There's nothing like a really loyal, dependable, good friend..." was Jennifer Aniston.

"If you live to be a hundred, I want to live to be a hundred minus one day..." was Winnie the Pooh.

And "Being honest may not get you a lot of friends, but it'll always get you the right ones" was John Lennon.

Friendship in the World and the Church

The world has a lot to say about friendship, and so does God, in the Bible.

Abraham and Moses were both called a *friend of God*. I wonder what it was about their lives that people thought that is what they should be called?

Jesus built his whole ministry on friendship and community. He was sneeringly called "a *friend* of sinners."

He said to his disciples, "I no longer call you servants; I call you *friends*. You are my *friends* if you do what I command."

Even Judas, the thief, *at the very moment when he left to betray him*, Jesus said, "Do it quickly, *friend*."

In the New Testament letters Peter, Paul, John, Jude and the writer of Hebrews all address members of the churches they write to as "*my dear friends*."

Friendship is key to building strong, healthy churches. American pastor Rick Warren once said, "People are not looking for a friendly church. They are looking for a church where they can make friends."

In other words, people don't want to belong to a church that's just big smiles and a handshake at the door; they want community and companionship.

Proverbs on Friendship

Over the last four weeks, we've been looking at the Book of Proverbs in the Bible.

Proverbs are common sense, everyday wisdom about the way life works out most of the time. You can always find exceptions, but 99 times out of 100, things go a certain way.

The Proverbs teach that usually, things tend to work out OK for people who work hard, who watch their words, who are prudent with money, who eat and drink in moderation, and who make moral choices according to the Maker's Instructions.

We're looking at Proverbs on the theme of friendship today. And they have a lot to say about it.

I'm going to list five qualities of a good friend; because this is how God wants relationships in the church to be. A good friend is frank with you, gives you good advice, cares about you, inspires you and is always there for you. I've alliterated them as candour, counsel, care, character and constancy.

1. Candour

The first quality of a good friend, is candour. A good friend will tell you the truth and be straight with you, even if it's hard to say and painful to hear.

Proverbs 27.6; "Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses."

If you've ever had surgery, you know that it's uncomfortable. You have to have anaesthetic, which is no small matter. You are sliced open with a sharp knife. Your internal organs are messed about with. They stitch you back together. Then, you are sore for weeks.

But a surgeon, cuts you not to harm you but to heal you, and real friends are not afraid to do likewise. True friends can be brutally honest with you.

What a friend we have in Jesus; Jesus didn't indulge his disciples. When necessary, he told them the uncomfortable truth, even if it stung at times.

2. Counsel

Secondly, counsel - a good friend will give you valuable advice.

Proverbs 27.9; "Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of a friend springs from their heartfelt advice."

My wife Kathie is invaluable for advice. She just knows the right thing to do. Should I phone? Should I phone *now*, even though it's late? Would a card be better? Is this card appropriate? Should wear a tie? Flowers, chocolates or a bottle of wine? What do you think?

She saves me from a million calamities. Actually, she accidentally slammed the car boot on my head two weeks, so she *creates* the odd calamity as well, but I think it's a small price to pay...

What a friend we have in Jesus; people came to him all confused in private and he always patiently set them right.

3. Care

Thirdly, care - a good friend will have your best interests at heart.

Proverbs 12.26; "The righteous choose their friends carefully, but the way of the wicked leads them astray."

Good friends inspire you and improve you because they want what's good for you and you matter to them.

What a friend we have in Jesus; he saw the crowds and had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

He cared about the leper, about the woman caught in adultery, about the blind beggar, about the widow about to bury her son, and everybody else.

4. Character

Fourthly, character – a good friend's better qualities will rub off on you.

Proverbs 23.20-21 says, "Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags."

How many times has it been said in a court of law, "Your honour, it all started when I fell into the wrong crowd"?

As it says in 1 Corinthians 15, "bad company corrupts good character." The year before I became a Christian, I graffitied an entire train carriage with a mate of mine. I *never* would have done that alone, or with my better friends.

What a friend we have in Jesus; on the very last night before he died, he looked back over the three years he had spent with his disciples and he said to them, "You have been purified by the word I have spoken to you."

5. Constancy

And the fifth quality of a good friend is constancy - a good friend will be there for you in trouble and not let you down.

Proverbs 17.17 says, "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity."

A young woman who had just come to faith asked the Victorian preacher C. H. Spurgeon, "How many of my friends should I give up now I am a believer?" He said, "Don't bother, they'll give up on you soon enough."

But the best friends are loyal and stick by you. They don't give up on you. Even if you disappoint them, they forgive you and restore you. True, deep, real friendships are a fantastic defence in times of discouragement.

And what a friend we have in Jesus; his last words to his followers in Matthew's Gospel were, "I will be with you till the end of the age."

Ending

What sort of friend does God want you to be at Saint Mary's this coming year, both to regulars and to visitors?

Follow Jesus. However stretched he was, and no one could be in greater demand than him, he always seemed to have time for people.

Wealthy people like Levi, beggars like Bartimaeus, whores like Mary Magdalene, crooks like Zacchaeus, intellectuals like Nicodemus, foreigners like the Roman centurion, widows, children, labourers, lawyers... you name it...

Proverbs 22.11; "One who loves a pure heart and who speaks with grace will have the king for a friend."

Maybe even the King of kings. Let's pray...