

I. Introduction

A. During the night of On October 25, 2007, members of 1st Platoon, B Company (173rd Airborne Brigade), were walking back to their outpost in eastern Afghanistan when they were ambushed. Sal Giunta response was so noble that he was nominated for, and eventually received, the Medal of Honor. When asked why he braved incessant machine-gun and small-arms fire during the ambush to charge the enemy alone in search of one of his fellow soldiers, his straightforward reply was, “He would have done the same for me.”¹

B. I want you to reflect on that for a second. Are you fortunate enough to have a friend like that? Someone you would charge the hill for? Someone who would charge the hill for you? It’s probably more important than you realize.

C. Back when I was consulting, one of my clients was a grocery store chain. And early in my work with them we did a customer survey attempting to determine why people shopped where they shopped. Was it price? Selection? Service? The produce?

D. A couple weeks later I was reflecting on the data when I was struck with a blinding case of the obvious. We had not even listed the most obvious reason why people shop where they shop. The biggest reason is location. We shop at stores close to where we live.

E. Today we look at one of these factors that is so obvious we may not have noticed it.

F. Our starting premise for this series has been: if we want to avoid being drift wood carried downstream by whatever the latest fads and fashions, we need a strong inner world – we need a more vibrant and robust relationship with God.

G. We turned to Proverbs for help with this because it’s a very practical book written by someone who thought a lot about these kinds of things. And in our survey of the book a number of things bubbled up:

1. First: We need wisdom – godly character in action.²
2. Second: In order to grow wise we need discipline. We need to be willing to suffer now to establish the kind of habits that we see in the lives of deep people – like Jesus
3. Third: We need time with God. We noted the important of meditation on God’s word as a way of allowing His truth and insights to go deep into our hearts and minds.
4. Last week I talked about playing defense. As opposed to focusing on things we should do, we looked at avoiding things that pull us down, especially sexual sin,³ which Solomon has a lot to say about.⁴

¹ David Temples, *A Culture of Sacrifice*, TableTalk, July 2011

² I heard a new definition of wisdom this week: wisdom is the ability to make good decisions in the 80 percent of life that is not dictated by moral rules.

- H. There is actually one more thing on his list. And it is so obvious that we may not have thought about it. But according to Proverbs there is something else we have to pay attention to if we want to go deep: our friends.
- I. Our relationship with God is profoundly shaped by who we spend time with. “We become like the company we keep.” Or, to put this in the context of Proverbs: the companion of fools suffers harm, but he who walks with the wise grows wise.
- J. Proverbs says you will not lead a wise life unless you are good at choosing, forging and keeping terrific friendships
- II. Solomon is not alone in documenting the profound importance of friends.
- A. Which he not only does in Proverbs but also in Ecclesiastes, which was read for you earlier.
- B. Perhaps the most famous Old Testament counsel on friendship is found in I Samuel, which documents the relationship between David and Jonathan.⁵
- C. In the New Testament we have Paul’s statement in I Cor. 15: Do not be misled: “Bad company corrupts good character.” We also have all of the “one another” passages, which imply good friends. We are told to:
1. Encourage one another.
 2. Love one another
 3. Bear one another’s burdens.
 4. Confess our sins to one another
- D. We could build a case for friendship from a variety of biblical texts. We can make the case that life works best when we are good at choosing, cultivating and keeping terrific friends. I want to make these points by focusing on what we learn from a few prominent Proverbs.
- III. Before we turn there let me frame things just a bit
- A. I am going to assume that you have a working knowledge about friendships. For instance, you understand that we are profoundly social creatures. After all:
1. As infants we need to be cared for longer than any other animal.
 2. Being placed in solitary confinement is one of the harshest forms of punishment we have.

³ If we want to draw closer to God we need to pursue holiness. God is holy. See: I Thes. 4:7 and I Peter 1:6.

⁴ This week I read that Playboy magazine is no longer going to feature nudity. My first thought was, this is a desperate move from a company in financial trouble. But their explanation (which is likely spin) also made some sense. They announced that they had won the war. Anything you want to see is just a click away. Nudity is now passé so they were moving on. What a bizarre world we live in.

⁵ In I Samuel 18 – 20 we see the example of a great friendship in which they come to really trust each other with their lives.

3. We have been made in the image of a God who has always been one God in three persons and who has perfectly modeled friendship at the deepest level.

4. I think we all even get that if we have friends – even pets! – we are often healthier.⁶

B. But let me make four quick points:

1. First, we need to hear what Solomon says because we are losing ground on this front – especially men.

a) As a rule women have more of what sociologists call “social capital” than men do. If you ask a woman to name her best friend she will almost certainly talk about someone she sees often and talks to weekly. If you ask a man to name their best friend they may talk about someone they have not connected with in six months.⁷

b) But neither American men nor women are doing great on this front. According to *The American Sociological Review*, American adults have fewer friends than a generation ago and also increasingly fewer confidants.⁸ Indeed, twenty-five percent of people questioned said they had zero close friends.

2. Second, we need to hear how important God thinks friends are.

a) It’s not a huge mystery why friendships are declining: we relocate more often; we do not need friends as much as we used to because we can hire people to help us do things friends used to do years ago; and we do other things with our non-work time instead of hanging out with friends. Mostly we watch TV.

⁶ Leonard Syme, a professor of epidemiology at the University of California at Berkeley, indicates the importance of social ties and social support systems in relationship to mortality and disease rates. He points to Japan as being number one in the world with respect to health and then discusses the close social, cultural, and traditional ties in that country as the reason. He believes that the more social ties, the better the health and the lower the death rate. Conversely, he indicates that the more isolated the person, the poorer the health and the higher the death rate. Social ties are good preventative medicine for physical problems and for mental-emotional-behavior problems. Martin & Diedre Bobgan, *How To Counsel From Scripture*, Moody Press, 1985, p. 18.

⁷ Married or single, employed or not, women make 10 – 20 percent more long-distance calls to family and friends than men, are responsible for nearly three times as many greeting cards and gifts, and write two to four times as many personal letters as men. Women spend more time visiting with friends, though full-time work blurs this gender difference, by trimming friendship ties for both sexes. Keeping up with friends and relatives continues to be socially divided as women’s work...In short, women are more avid social capitalists than men. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, p 95.

⁸ From “Death by Suburbs Sermon series.” Speaker unknown.

- b) Recently I have been reading some novels by Wendell Berry. In both his non-fiction and fiction he agitates for a very different kind of world. And one of the things he talks about over and over is that years ago farmers would show up after dinner at their neighbors to “sit until after dark” and talk. We have lost that social fabric and he argues we are much poorer for it. I think he’s right.
- c) Solomon has a few things to say about finding friends – much of it I think comes down to being the kind of friend you want to have. But I want to be sure you hear having good friends is part of the advice God is giving you.
3. Third, I want to briefly clarify what I mean by the word friend.
- a) When I use the word *friend* I am referring to a close confidant.
- b) We are not turning to Solomon to find out how to expand our Network through Linked-in, FaceBook or other social media.
- c) In the fourth book in the Broken series – which was on friends and which I continue to get the most feedback on – I drew a circle and said:
- (1) If you are married, your closest relationship is to be with your spouse. The goal is that two become one. You may or may not describe that person as your best friend, but that relationship matters more than any other. But I am not talking about marriage right now.
- (2) Outside the circle would be 7 B people – and there are concentric circles for four levels: The first ring – level 1 friends – refers to neighbors, acquaintances and business associates you know them well enough to wave at and talk to but you may not know their name. Level two represents those whose name you know –probably 200 or so people. Level three represents 10-30 people who you feel pretty close to. Old best friends, former college roommates, people with whom you can quickly pick back up a deep conversation with. Level Four represents at most a very few people with whom you have the closest relationship possible outside of marriage. They know you. There are no secrets. And you can count on them to be there for you no matter what. (I have also referred to these people as 2 AM Friends. Which means, not only can you call them at 2AM if life is spinning out of control, but they would be confused and mad if you didn’t). Most of what I am talking about today falls into Level Four
4. The final preliminary point is this: When I advocate for friendships, I am not suggesting that you are never alone.
- a) I am a big advocate of solitude. Not the “just me and ESPN radio” solitude, but just you and the Lord and quiet. This is one of the big rewards of getting up early.

b) In my notes I include some comments by Skye Jethani in which he powerfully notes that we need both solitude and community.⁹ Many of us operate in a fuzzy no-man’s-land in which we are never alone and yet never really in deep community. We need both.

IV. But let’s turn to Proverbs. This book is a gold mine of insights about friendship. God makes several important points. Let me whet your appetite by highlighting three.

A. First: We are who we are because of our friends. We rise and fall with them.

1. Proverbs 12:26 reads: The righteous choose their friends carefully, but the way of the wicked leads them astray; Proverbs 13:20 makes a similar point: Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.¹⁰

2. We become like the company we keep.

3. Now, these passages do not necessarily mean you need new friends – that you need to fire all of your friends, tell them you’re moving up and they didn’t make the grade. It may be that all you need are better friendships (a different kind of relationship) with the same people. That you need to help them take a step up. I’ll leave that up for more prayer and reflection.

4. But the basic message is, we are shaped by those we spend time with. Indeed, we’re deceived (I’m thinking of I Cor. 15:33) if we think we can spend time with people and not be influenced by them in some way.

5. Let me reframe this for the Deep series – you cannot go deep if you only have shallow friends or shallow friendships. If our friends are shallow then we will be shallow. If we have shallow relationships with people who might be deep – we will be shallow. Our friendships shape us. They pull us down or lift us up. We are no better than they are.

⁹ Sherry Turkle is a researcher at MIT. She has done extensive studies on the impact technology has on our capacity for social engagement and relational intimacy. Originally Turkle was an outspoken advocate of technology, but as her research deepened she changed her opinion. Turkle says mobile technology, like the smart phone you are probably holding right now, means we never have to be bored. The moment we feel the first twinge of boredom we reach for a device to distract ourselves./ The problem with this, says Turkle, is that times of solitude and boredom are how we discover ourselves. That is when we get in touch with our deeper feelings, thoughts, fears, and desires. It may be uncomfortable at first, but a growing self-awareness is how we increase our capacity to be intimate with others. As we know ourselves we are able to give ourselves to another. This is what mobile technology disrupts. “If we’re not able to be alone,” says Turkle, “we’re going to be more lonely.” We will lose our ability to relate deeply with others. / This does not mean solitude is more important than community, only that solitude is necessary for genuine community. Dietrich Bonhoeffer summarized it this way: “Let him who cannot be alone beware of community... Let him who is not in community beware of being alone... Each by itself has profound perils and pitfalls. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and the one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair.”

¹⁰ There are several other Proverbs that stress the idea that foolish friends cause harm: 1) 14:7: Stay away from a fool, for you will not find knowledge on their lips; 2) 22:24: Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn their ways and get yourself ensnared. The gist is, there are some people who are very much like a big bomb with a short fuse. If you are around them when they go off you will be hurt

- B. Two: In fact, in some important ways, friends trump siblings.
1. This is a tricky point to state. I initially wrote, “friends are more important than family,” but I don’t think God is saying exactly that.
 2. I’m referring to Proverbs 18:24, which reads, “One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother;” and also, Proverbs 17:17, which reads, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity.”
 3. These are amazing statements given that they are made in a culture where family counted for so much. As I noted earlier, today we are very mobile. We move away from family. I am the oldest of five children. Collectively we have lived in ten states. That would not have been the case in Solomon’s time.
 4. What these Proverbs says is: you can count on your family in a crisis because they are family. But a friend is better. They are always around, and that is what makes life great. They stick closer than a sibling – with the Hebrew word being used here being the one also translated “cleave.” (In today’s world, to cleave is often understood as to divide, but in King James English it meant to cling to. In Genesis we read, “For this reason a man shall leave his family and cleave to his wife.”
 5. As it turns out, every culture puts friendship on the back seat.¹¹ Liberal cultures (like ours) focus on sexual love first. When you stand in line at the grocery store the glossy magazines do not focus on who is best friends with who, it’s about who is sleeping with who.¹² In a liberal culture, sexual relationships get the most attention. In a traditional culture family is first. In a socialist culture civic relationships are first. Everyone puts friends second (or lower). Why? Friendship is not a biological or sociological necessity. It’s something we have to pursue.
 6. In his essay on friendship, C.S. Lewis writes, “Friendship is... the least natural of loves; the least instinctive, organic, biological, gregarious and necessary. It has the least commerce with our nerves; there is nothing throaty about it; nothing that quickens the pulse or turns you red and pale.” You see, without erotic love we wouldn’t exist. If not for familial love we wouldn’t have been reared. We need fellow citizens to get by. But technically speaking, we do not need friends. And therefore, in a busy culture like ours, they fall away. The other types of relationships push themselves on you.
 - a) We have to deal with our family; we have to maintain professional networks; we have to keep some sort of society running; but we do not technically need friends, and so these relationships that take time over time, can be squeezed out.

¹¹ Thanks to Tim Keller in his sermon on Proverbs and Friendship for these insights.

¹² The one block buster movie about friendship recently is *The Lord of the Rings*. In the book the romantic liaisons are only noted in the appendixes, but they made it into the movie b/c in our culture you needed it. (Aragorn and Eowyn’s love affair is front and center because in our culture friendship is seldom enough to carry the day).

7. Yet Proverbs says, a friend is more valuable than a brother because without them we are less than we could be. Solomon is writing at a time when your family defined you. But he says, a friend is more important than a brother or sister.

8. And the reason it because of the joy a great friendship bring. Again, let me quote Lewis. He writes: “I have no duty to be anyone's Friend and no man in the world has a duty to be mine. Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art, like the universe itself (for God did not need to create). It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival.” Friends are precious and of greater value than a sibling.

C. Three: Real friendships must be cultivated.

1. Number one: We are who we are because of our friendships; number two: friends trump family; number three: the kind of friendships we are after must be nurtured and cultivated.

2. Now it's worth noting that they must also be discovered.

a) Back in the 19th century, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote an essay on friendship in which he marvels at how rare a true friend is, because to find a true friend you have to find someone who sees the world the same way you do.

b) And in his writings on friendship, C.S. Lewis says the same thing, stating that a friendship usually starts with someone saying, “What, you too? I thought I was the only one.” And going on to say, the most desperate people in the world are those who are looking for anyone to be their friend. It doesn't work that way. You have to find someone with whom there is chemistry.

c) Tim Keller makes a similar point in his study of Proverbs 27:9 – which talks about the sweetness of a friend. He argues that as you dig deep into this Proverb: 1) you realize the connection between pleasantness and honey; 2) then you realize that when the book of Proverbs was written, no one had figured out that you could add sugar to something to sweeten it, which meant you had to discover sweetness; ergo 3) Solomon is driving home the idea that you also have to discover a friend.¹³ They cannot be manufactured.¹⁴

¹³ A friendship begins with natural affinity and attraction. Some call it “chemistry.” What it really is, is a sharing of common interests and tastes and outlooks on life. You cannot force a “knitting” of hearts. It just happens. Lewis writes about this in *The Four Loves*: “That is why those pathetic people who simply 'want friends' can never make any. The very condition of having Friends is that we should want something else besides Friends.” Friendship must be *about* something, he said -- some common interest, “even if it were only an enthusiasm for dominoes or white mice. Those who have nothing can share nothing; those who are going nowhere can have no fellow-travelers.

¹⁴ Lewis makes two points here: 1) though a friend and a lover can be same, in one sense a friendship is not like a love affair. Lovers talk about their love. Friends do not. Friends are side to side in some common interest. Loves are face to face; 2) there is nothing more pathetic than those who simply want friends. You can't have a friendship on friendship. There has to be common interest.

d) I'm not sure I get this point from this Proverb, but I am inclined to agree that it's true since it closely mirrors my experience. When we were living in Washington I tried to force a friendship w/ the husband of my wife's best friend. But we just didn't see anything the same way. I feel like we both tried. I played the sports card, but he was only into motorized sports (racing, monster trucks, which I know little about) and when he told me that the last book he's read was in high school, I officially waived the white flag. There has to be some connection.

3. However, the point I am making is different. I am arguing that friendships have to be cultivated. They require time, even when it's inconvenient.

a) Back to Proverbs 17:17, "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity."

b) A friend loves when things are working and when they are not. A friend is around during the routine and the crisis. You sort of have to log that time. Spending time over time is at the heart of friendship.

c) And if you really sit with this – and also 18:24, which talks about unreliable friends leading to trouble (the point being they are not really friends. There are no fair-weather friends) – you realize that most people know you (and want to know you) because you are useful to them. And before you freak out, the same holds in reverse. Most of the people you know you know because they are useful to you: for having a good time; for getting things done; for meeting others.

d) But when people only know you when you are useful they will leave when your life collapses. With a friend you are not a means to an end but the end in yourself.

D. There are a lot more insights about friendship in Proverbs.

1. Proverbs 26:19 reads: Like a maniac shooting flaming arrows of death is one who deceives their neighbor and says, "I was only joking! Which suggests that real friends are going to understand you – be emotionally connected.

2. Proverbs 27:5 reads: Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses. Which suggests that one of the things a friend does is tell you things others will not. An enemy multiplies kisses – which makes us think of Judas betraying Christ with a kiss. Friends need to say what needs to be said. In fact, you are not a friend if you do not confront. If you do not want to go through that kind of turmoil it's not because you love the person too much to tell them the truth, it is because you love yourself and your easy life too much. (By the way, the more power or \$ you have the less likely you are to have friends who will tell you the truth.)

V. There is more – read it and ponder it for yourselves. Here is what I hope you get:

- A. Friends are rare, costly and important. They are one of the first things that get pushed aside in today's busy world, but they are God's plan for you and they make or break us. The wiser our friends, the better our life – the greater chance we have of going deep.
- B. So spend some time thinking about the state of your friendships and how you take them to the next level. You want friends who are going to pull you up and you want to be involved in pulling them up. It can happen. God can do that.
- C. So here is the action plan:
1. Pray for your friendships to go to the next level.¹⁵
 2. Work to become a better friend.
 3. Go home and reconnect with some old friends.
 4. Keep investing in your small group.
- D. My experience is, you have to be a lot more intentional about this than you think. And small groups will often go to Level Three if you give them time.

VI. Quotes

- A. *If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.* David Gergen.
- B. *Many men do not have friends. Or do not have current friends. They do not know how to be a friend or they do not have the right friends.* John Maxwell.
- C. *Satan watches for those vessels that sail without a convoy.* George Swinnock (1627-1673, Puritan Pastor)
- D. *Without friends no one would choose to live, though possessed of all other advantages.* Aristotle.
- E. *With the social networking sites of the new century...friendship is devolving from a relationship to a feeling--from something people share to something each of us hugs privately to ourselves in the loneliness of our electronic caves.* William Deresiewicz

¹⁵ "In friendship...we think we have chosen our peers. In reality a few years' difference in the dates of our births, a few more miles between certain houses, the choice of one university instead of another...the accident of a topic being raised or not raised at a first meeting--any of these chances might have kept us apart. But, for a Christian, there are, strictly speaking no chances. A secret master of ceremonies has been at work. Christ, who said to the disciples, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you," can truly say to every group of Christian friends, "Ye have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one another." The friendship is not a reward for our discriminating and good taste in finding one another out. It is the instrument by which God reveals to each of us the beauties of others."