

TWO CHARACTERISTICS OF A TRUE FRIEND

Introduction

As a young man, Joe Scriven had been engaged to a woman he deeply loved. But tragedy struck the night before their wedding; his fiancée drowned in a boating accident.

In hope of forgetting the shock and the loss, Joe left his home in Ireland and went to Canada. There he devoted himself to teaching school and living a very simple life; spending his money and strength to help people in need.

He was considered to be an eccentric by some, and consequently was consigned to a solitary life. That misunderstanding and isolation, coupled with the heartfelt loss of his fiancée, could have been overwhelming, had Joe not had such a good friend. In appreciation of that faithful friend, one day Joe wrote a poem, he entitled it, *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. Joe's poem to his Friend became one of the most beloved hymns of the Christian church (*Our Daily Bread*, 12/21/93.) Yes, as a Christian, the Son of God, your Lord and Savior, is also your best friend.

When seeking an earthly friend, and when seeking to be a true friend, look for the same characteristics that are found in the Lord Jesus Christ, our great and divine Friend. Look for a friend who exhibits faithful commitment, like the Lord Jesus:

Knowing that his hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father, and having loved his own who were in the world, Jesus now loved them to the fullest extent. (Jn. 13:1)

Look for a friend who gives godly counsel, like the Lord Jesus:

I did not speak of my own accord; on the contrary, the Father who sent me, he has commanded me what to say and how to speak. ⁵⁰And I know that his commandment is eternal life. Therefore, what I say is just what the Father has spoken to me. (Jn. 12:49-50)

Our next topical study from the Book of Proverbs focuses our attention on these two characteristics of a true friend.

I. Cherish the Friend who Demonstrates True Commitment (Prov. 17:17; Prov. 18:24; Prov. 19:6; Prov. 23:6-8; Prov. 20:19)

A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity. (Prov. 17:17)

A true friend is distinguished by his faithfulness; he *“loves at all times.”* As expressed in the words of a popular song;

In good times, in bad times,
You can count on me for sure:
I'll be at your side forevermore,
That's what friends are for.

Consider the example of Jonathan and David. Jonathan exhibited his friendship for David even in the face of the evil wrath of his father and despite the prospect of losing the throne of Israel:

Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself ... ³And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. ⁴Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt. (1 Sam. 18:1,3-4)

Consider David's eulogy for Jonathan: *“I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women”* (2 Sam. 1:26.)

A time of adversity is when you really need a friend, and that is when you discover who will prove himself to be a true friend. Cherish the friend who demonstrates true commitment.

He who makes many friends does so to his own ruin; but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. (Prov. 18:24)

Proverbs 18:24a is describing the man who wants to be friends with everybody; he wants to be liked by all, he cannot stand the thought of being rejected by anybody. Such a man will sacrifice anything (his integrity, his virtue, his standards, his self-respect, his dignity, his conscience, his convictions) to be accepted and gain “friends.” But he does so to his own destruction; he has sacrificed all that is valuable, and he gets nothing of value in return.

Consider the blind beggar who boldly withstands the Pharisees:

So a second time they summoned the man who had been blind and said to him, “Give glory to God, we know that this man is a sinner.” ²⁵He answered, “I do not know whether or not he is a sinner. One thing I do know: I was blind, but now I can see.” ²⁶Then they asked him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” ²⁷He answered them, “I already told you, but you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” ²⁸They reviled him and said, “You are his disciple; but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God spoke to Moses; but we do not know from where this man comes.” ³⁰The man replied, “This is remarkable! You do not know from where he

comes and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners; but if anyone worships God and does his will, God listens to him. ³²Since the world began no one has ever heard of anyone opening the eyes of a man born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” ³⁴They responded to him by saying, “You were totally born in sins, and would you teach us?” And they threw him out. (Jn. 9:24-34)

Now contrast the beggar with those rulers who dared not withstand the Pharisees: *“even among the rulers many believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³for they loved the glory that is from men more than the glory that is from God”* (Jn. 12:42-43.)

What accounts for the difference between the beggar with his boldness and the rulers who were too timid to confess their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? The blind beggar had no influential “friends” (he was not a part of the “network.”) But he did have a lot of character, courage—and independence. The rulers were “in the loop” of influential people, but that “loop” proved to be a noose around their necks, preventing them from taking a stand for truth and expressing their commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. These men allowed themselves to be held captive by the threat of rejection by their influential “friends;” these rulers are an example of what Proverbs 18:24a means when it says, *“He who makes many friends does so to his own ruin.”*

Proverbs 18:24b contrasts the many *“friends”* with the one friend who *“sticks closer than a brother.”* The characteristic of a true friend is faithfulness (not manipulating his friends for his own benefit, not rejecting his friends when they take a courageous and dangerous stand for truth and righteousness;) ... and such friendship is a rarity (it is the one true friend in contrast to the many so-called friends.)

Many will curry the favor of a generous man, and everyone is a friend to the man who gives gifts. (Prov. 19:6)

Take a bag of peanuts to the city park, sprinkle a few on the ground, and before long you are surrounded by a whole flock of pigeons. But what happens when you run out of peanuts? Your pigeon “friends” desert you.

Whereas some people seek to gain and maintain friends by compromising their character, other people seek to buy friends with their wealth and generosity. But such “friends” will only remain so long as your resources hold out. In His parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus declares,

... the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.

¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. (Lk. 15:13-16)

Note that once the young man's resources were exhausted all his "friends" deserted him and not one came to his aid. The best way to gain a true friend is to give yourself to him without compromise.

Do not eat the food of a stingy man, and do not desire his delicacies; ⁷for he keeps his thoughts to himself. "Eat and drink," he says to you, but his heart is not with you. ⁸You will vomit up the morsel you have eaten and will have wasted your compliments. (Prov.23:6-8)

This proverb is speaking about a selfish, self-centered man; it says literally, "*Do not eat the food of a man who has an evil eye*". "An evil eye" has the meaning of selfish, sinister motivation; note Deuteronomy 15:7-9,

*If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that Jehovah your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother; ⁸rather, be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. ⁹Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," and consequently, you have **an evil eye** toward your needy brother and you give him nothing. He may then appeal to Jehovah against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. (Deut. 15:7-9)*

This is a man whose own interests are paramount in his life; he does not have the interest or even the capacity to be a true friend. The counsel of Scripture is to not accept his offer of hospitality and supposed friendship. Why? Do not accept his proffered "friendship" because he is cunning and conniving: "*he keeps his thoughts to himself.*" What he is really like is revealed in the thoughts and plans of his heart, which he conceals from you. In his mind he calculates what benefit he can derive from your acquaintance and how he can use your relationship for his own personal profit. Based on the Hebrew word שָׁעָר, meaning "to value" or "to estimate," the Old Testament commentators Keil and Delitzsch render the phrase, "*he is like one who calculates with himself.*" In other words, he privately calculates what advantage he can derive from this "friendship," and then sets himself to gain personal benefit at the other's expense, all unbeknown to the unsuspecting "friend." Furthermore, he is insincere. "*Eat and drink," he says to you* [i.e., to accept his hospitality and friendship] *but his heart is not with you.*" Rather than opening his heart to you, which is a characteristic of true friendship, he is concealing his heart and withholding his heart from you. "*His heart is not with you;*" indeed, it is against you and for himself alone.

According to verse 8, you will eventually pay dearly for his "friendship." You will vomit out "*the morsel*" (indicating his stinginess) you have eaten; even the little

he does give you will be disgustingly retrieved. *"You will have wasted your compliments."* Your complimentary words towards this man will prove to be in vain, and when used with reference to such a man those words lose their value and become meaningless.

He who goes around as a gossip reveals secrets, therefore do not be a companion with the man who talks too much. (Prov. 20:19)

The scenario presented in this proverb is as follows: You are dealing with a man who does not keep a confidence, he does not keep a secret, he betrays a trust. His friend has revealed a secret of the heart to him; perhaps for his counsel, or his support, or his prayers, or just for the relief of sharing a pressing and personal matter. Rather than keeping that matter confidential, he broadcasts it to everyone; he indulges the wicked lust to gossip and make public what was shared with him in confidence.

The counsel of Scripture: Do not be a companion with such a man, a man who cannot keep a confidence and who betrays a trust. Do not keep company with him because he lacks the chief characteristic of a true friend: faithfulness. Furthermore, you may become like him.

The first counsel of Proverbs is to Cherish the Friend who Demonstrates True Commitment:

- the friend who will be there in times of adversity
- the friend who will stand by you when all others reject you
- the friend who will not exploit you for his own selfish gain
- the friend who will not betray a confidence

Cherish such a friend, and by the grace of Christ, seek to be such a friend.

II. Cherish the Friend Who Confronts You with Godly Counsel (Proverbs 27:5-6; Proverbs 27:17; Proverbs 18:1)

An open rebuke is better than love that is hidden. ⁶The wounds inflicted by a friend are given in faithfulness, but the kisses of an enemy are profuse. (Prov. 27:5-6)

The *"wounds"* inflicted by a friend are referring to the words of rebuke spoken by a true friend for your well-being. Here is the mark by which to gauge a true friend: Does he love you enough to rebuke you when you are in the wrong? Such rebuke demonstrates his commitment to God and his commitment to you.

Conversely, beware of flattery, for it is deceitful. Such words conceal an ulterior motive: *"A man who flatters his neighbor is spreading a net for his feet"* (Prov. 29:5.) Such words reveal an uncommitted heart: *"the kisses of an enemy are*

profuse" (Prov. 27:6;) an enemy may display a great show of affection and affirmation, but in fact his heart is not for you.

What counsel does Scripture give about administering and receiving a rebuke? In giving a rebuke we are to "*speak the truth in love*" (Eph. 4:15.) By the grace of God, we are also to be ready and willing to receive a sincere and well-meant rebuke; may we be like the Psalmist: "*Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it*" (Psl. 141:5a.)

As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the expression of his friend. (Prov. 27:17)

"Iron sharpens iron;" when you scrape iron against iron you take off the dullness and make it razor sharp. Likewise, as a man interacts with his friend—exchanging insights, receiving counsel and rebuke when necessary, being challenged by his godly example—the man's "*expression,*" literally, his "*countenance,*" is sharpened. Note: The "*countenance*" refers to the face and its expression as it reveals the mood and character of the person.

Do you have a friend who provokes you in the way described in Hebrews 10:24? We read there, "*Let us consider how we may provoke one another to love and good deeds.*" If so, thank God for him.

He who separates himself is devoted to his own desire, and he rages against all sound wisdom. (Prov. 18:1)

This proverb is speaking about a man who separates himself from the company and counsel of his friends and fellow believers. It further describes him as being "*devoted to his own desire;*" in other words, he has become infatuated and even obsessed with a desire, a plan, an idea, an ambition, etc. The Hebrew literally reads, "*separating himself, he devotes himself to a desire.*" Some idea or ambition gets hold of him; he becomes determined to pursue it, even to the point of removing himself from the counsel and care of his friends.

This man is further described as raging "*against all sound wisdom.*" He has become so obsessed with this desire that he has become unreasonable and irrational. The implication is that the desire itself is less than reasonable or upright, and it has managed to attract this man, confuse him, and even possess him. Now he is at the point where (like a mad man) he is raging against all sound wisdom (godly words of counsel intended to help and guide him and extract him from the hold that this desire is exerting upon him.)

This proverb points out our need for godly friends and brethren who can give us sound biblical counsel, and it also warns us of the danger of rejecting such counsel.

The counsel of Proverbs is to Cherish that Friend who Confronts you with Godly Counsel, the friend who loves you enough to tell you when you are wrong; the friend whose life provokes you to Christ-like conduct. Appreciate such a friend and do not separate yourself from him; and, by the grace of Christ, seek to be such a friend.

Conclusion

As Joseph Scriven testified in his poem, our best Friend is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. When seeking an earthly friend, look for the same characteristics that are found in the friendship offered by the Lord Jesus. Cherish the friend who 1) demonstrates true commitment; and 2) confronts you with godly counsel—and by the grace of Christ, seek to be such a friend.