

How to Develop Lasting Friendships

Ecclesiastes 4:7-12; Verses from Proverbs

Ecclesiastes says, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe is one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help."

Survey's say that the number one emotional problem in North America is the problem of loneliness. Possibly the greatest problem with physical distancing is – lack of being with people. The main thing people have missed in church life in the last months is: fellowship.

Everyone wants friends. All you have to do to have a best selling book is to write on how to make and keep friends. I suspect with Covid, fellowship and friendship and simply being with people is more important than ever. It's a reason people congregate - and the virus gets passed on.

The Bible says we were made to have friends. God put Adam in the Garden, alone, and then realized, "It is not good for man to be alone." So he created Eve. "Two are better than one."

Real friendships are seldom accidental. They are developed, planned, cultivated, nurtured, built. Solomon said, to have friends we must be friendly. I've known people who regularly complain – "No one ever talks to me." When I observe them, it's partially true. But I notice three things. One – they never engage anyone. Two – they never try to hold a conversation – they just give one word responses when people talk with them. Three, their conversation is full of griping, complaining.

So let's look at six principles from Proverbs that show how to develop lasting relationships. These are good for anyone of any age. And they are key purpose for healthy churches and for decision making and working together.

To develop lasting friendships I must be committed. Proverbs 18:24 says, "Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin." A true friend sticks closer than a brother. It's fun to socialize and know a lot

of people. It's probably good to have many shallow acquaintances. But a too active social life can be hazardous to developing close friendships. We can waste a lot of energy and time with superficial relationships. We don't need a lot of friends, but we do need a few good ones that are committed to us and we to them. The point is, we ought to concentrate on quality not quantity when it comes to friendships.

The Good News translation of Proverbs 18:24 says, "Some friendships do not last, but some friends are more loyal than brothers." Loyal means commitment. Friendship begins with reliability. Steadfastness.

But we live in a throw away society. And what we throw away at times are friendships. We discard them like nothing ever happened. If a friend doesn't please us, we dump them. If a friend makes a social blunder, we ignore them. If a friend has a different opinion, too bad. I'll just get another one. But commitment is key to a lasting friendship. In Biblical terms it's called a covenant. That's an agreement to be loyal always.

To develop friendships I must be committed. Second, considerate. Proverbs 17:9 says, "One who forgives an affront fosters friendship, but one who dwells on disputes will alienate a friend." The NIV says, "He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends."

What this means here is be caring and kind. Accept your friend's warts and all. We forgive their blunders. We don't kick them when they are down. If you ever want to know who your friends are, just make a mistake. See what the people around you do. Do they desert you? Put you down? Gossip about you? Call you names? Your friends are very much aware of your weakness and foibles and faults and failures. They just choose to work with them. Or overlook them. That's what a friend does. A friend does not rub it in. A friend doesn't make a big deal about it. Friends are good forgetters.

What consideration means is an attitude of acceptance. Like the expression, "You're a good

egg, even if you are a little cracked!" Nobody's perfect. We're all a little cracked, even on our best days. But we can still have friendships by being committed and by being considerate. Considerate means we treat other people the way we want to be treated. The Living Bible says, "Love forgets mistakes, nagging about them parts the best of friends." If we want to develop lasting friendships we must be committed to those people and then be considerate.

Third, we must be confidential. That means be able to keep a secret. Proverbs 11:13 tells us, "A gossip goes about telling secrets, but one who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a confidence." We live in a society that can't keep secrets. We have magazines whose sole task is to uncover secrets. Even worse, we buy and listen to those magazines and online. There was a guy who received a letter from his girl friend, breaking up with him. He shared the letter with his best friend. The best friend, took the letter, photocopied it and posted it all over the school. That's not being a friend!

Proverbs 16:28 explains, "A perverse person spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends." The quickest way to kill a friendship is to not be confidential. And for those of us who love to gossip, do you realize the reputation you've developed, keeps you from having good friends? A good friend is committed, considerate, and confidential. A friend can listen to you without having the burning desire to blab everything you say to somebody else.

Fourth, to develop lasting friendships, we must be candid. Proverbs 27: 5 & 6 instruct us, "Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts, but profuse are the kisses of an enemy." A friend is somebody who will say something to you and even though it hurts, it's the truth and they do it because they love you. They are candid. A true friend will level with you, even argue with you. They will shoot straight with you. They are open, honest, and frank. If you ask them to tell you the truth, they will give it to you. They will give you the facts even when it's painful. They level with you.

Everyone of us has blind spots. The person who thinks they don't have any blind spots has at least one! All of us need people who care enough about us to call us on the carpet when we need it & say, "You're blowing it." As a pastor I sometimes hear, "I know they are my best friend and I know they are making a big mess of their life, but it's none of my business, so will you go fix them?" The simple truth is, real friends make it their business. If you are aware and you care, you will share. Friends make it their business to be forthright and say, "You're messing up here."

This is tough, but in a friendship, if we as a friend can't get the message across, who can? Proverbs 24:26 in the Good News says, "An honest answer is the sign of a true friendship." A genuine friend is one who can level with you and be frank. They can warn you, slow you down, ask you to reconsider. Have you even felt embarrassed after the fact, and then wondered, why didn't anyone clue me in? Friends look out for each other.

Let's look at three rules on how to be candid. *First*, we compliment in public; we correct in private. This is very important. We will lose a friend real quick if we correct them in public.

Second, we seldom rebuke a friend until we have proven that we are open to rebuke from them. Criticism is a two way street. And you take the first step. We all need someone who will correct us and we need to be open to that correction. Correction in love is always a two way street.

And all of us at times need neutral people who help us see ourselves. They just love us and the only reason they are telling us is because they love us. One warning here. Often friends can get caught up in something together and not see the forest for the trees. So sometimes we need a friend who doesn't have a direct stake in the matter at hand, who has an outside view, who will neither profit or lose by the criticism. They do it because they care. It's an important part of friendship.

The *third* rule on how to be candid with friends is, generally correct them when they are up, not when they are down. Try to get to them when they are feeling good, not bad. When are many fights at

home generated? I suspect they start when one or both parties are tired, down, worried, frazzled. That's when we too often dump on each other, when we can least handle it. So WAIT! If you have to, even schedule a time. Say, "I want to talk with you tomorrow about.... When can we meet?" Correct when people are up, not down.

Proverbs 27:9 says, "...the pleasantness of one's friend springs from their earnest counsel." The problem many people have is they don't have anyone who cares enough to be this kind of a person. We all need friends at this level. Too often we don't get beyond the superficial.

Once Rose and I were saved from a serious mistake in taking on a new pastorate. Friends came to us and shared information about the congregation we were considering. They told us what the conference and the church search committee didn't tell us, despite our questions. It saved us from making a disastrous move. It wasn't that the issues scared us. What scared us was the withholding of key information from us about their history – despite our pointed questions.

Do you have anybody in your life, even a spouse, who has the freedom to point out where you are making a mistake and you know that they will do it in love? If you don't you are living in a very dangerous precarious position. The Bible says, "In the multitude of counselors there is safety." Proverbs 11:14. We need to have some people that we know and they know enough about us that they can tell us, "I think you'd better think this through again." Otherwise we get into big trouble.

To develop lasting friendships we must be constructive. "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." Proverbs 27:17 Real genuine friends build each other up, they stimulate each other to grow. They bring out the best in each other. They encourage each other. They lift us up. They motivate us and vice versa.

I don't need any friends who demotivate me. I get enough of that. There's enough negativity in the world. I don't need a friend constantly harping on me, putting me down, being critical, and constantly saying the world's going to pot. What I

need is a best buddy, building me up, encouraging me. Some people pull you down. That's their mission in life. The gift of criticism, and the gift of negativity, are not spiritual gifts.

Proverbs 12:26 advises us, "A righteous man is cautious in friendship." We need to be cautious in who we choose as friends. Why? You will become like the people you spend time with. If you don't want to be like your friends, don't spend time with them. If your friends are getting you into trouble, if your friends are taking you away from God's commandments, find other friends. It's easier to pull down a person than to pull up a person. The Bible says, "Do not be deceived; 'Bad company ruins good morals.'" I Cor 15:33

I have constantly prayed for my children – even today, that they have good Christian friends. And that they be involved in a church. It's a key purpose for the church. To help each other live the Christlike life. To give and offer help when life becomes difficult. To build each other up.

We need to choose. Sixteen times in the book of Proverbs it mentions sixteen types of people we should not have as friends. Read Proverbs and find those 16 types of people. The Bible clearly and explicitly says these are people you should not have as your closest friends because they will pull you down. They will draw you away from the Lord, rather than to the Lord. They will decrease your potential instead of increase your potential. Parents, study this with your children. We all need to choose friends who are constructive. The writer Emerson said, "A true friend is someone who makes us do what we can do." They encourage us to do our best.

How do we know when we are a real friend? We rejoice in their successes. We build people up. We don't get jealous. We don't compete. A real friend is someone who loves us when we are a smashing success and they don't get jealous about it. They don't get uptight. A real friend is someone we can share our victories with and they don't think we are bragging. The Bible says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." Rom 12:15

A secret of having all the friends in the world that you'll ever want is: Get excited about other people's successes. You'll have more friends than you can handle. When you find someone who is excited about other people's victories, that person is going to be very popular. I Thessalonians 5:11 instructs us, "Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing."

To develop lasting friendships, Proverbs says we need to be committed, considerate, confidential, candid, constructive and **consistent**. This is probably the greatest characteristic of a true friend. A real friend can be counted on. They are dependable. Proverbs 17:17 tells us, "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity." A genuine friend is in your corner when you're cornered. A real friend sees you through when everybody else sees you're through. A real friend walks in when every body else walks out. Real friends are like toothpaste - they come through in a tight squeeze, when the pressure's on.

Real friends take sides. They don't stay neutral. When you're in crises a real friend does not come and say, "I know you're going through tough times, but I know the other person. I just wanted you to know, I'm not taking sides." A brother is born for adversity. Friends stick with you even when it's inconvenient, uncomfortable, when it costs personally, even when you don't deserve it. They work at being a peace maker and not a peace keeper or in denial or avoidance. Simply put, a friend loves at all times. Not just when it's socially and politically correct and financially beneficial.

Research shows most North American men do not have one close friend. They have a lot of acquaintances who they do things with. But they are missing out on close friendships. And this disease is becoming part of women's lives. One reason many people don't have close friends is because of busyness. We are so involved in doing we've forgotten how to be. That's getting outside of God's will. Our Creator made us to have deep real genuine friendships. If Jesus needed friends, so do we. Out of the 12 disciples he had 3 who were closest to him.

Every church has the deep desire to be the

friendliest church in the neighborhood. When one church planter started he went and knocked on the doors of over 500 homes and asked, "Why do you think people don't attend church?" The second greatest reason people gave as to why they didn't go to church was, "Members are unfriendly to visitors. I don't feel welcomed."

Church members feel they are friendly – especially with each other. The real test of this is not how people are greeted, but who talks to whom between the front door and the pew. The real test is who we talk to after worship. Too often we run to our relatives or to someone we have church business with. How often do we invite a visitor out during the week? We seldom get a second chance for a first impression.

When you look at these 6 characteristics for lasting relationships, they are simply a description of Jesus Christ. They also are a purpose of the church. Jesus is committed to us. He accepts you. He forgives us. He wants to bring out the best in our lives. He rejoices in your successes. He'll always be there when we need Him. He can be counted on to help us rather than to judge us. He sacrificed His life for you. Solomon is saying we need to treat other people the way Jesus treats us. So if you are weak in any of these six areas, ask Jesus for help to be committed, considerate, confidential, candid, constructive and consistent.

Relationships are the most important thing in life. Jesus summarized it when he said, "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself." That's friendship with our Creator and with others. That's what counts. So this week go out and make a friend. Or improve a friendship. Take what you've learned here and put it into use.

Friendships must be cultivated, worked on, developed. It's the quality of friendships that make a church work. Not the programs. Or the committees. Or the pastor. Or church building. Or vision. It's people with good friendships with each other, with Jesus Christ, and with a desire to make friends with others outside our normal circle of friendships. Friendships have a crucial role in the church. It's one purpose of a congregation.

(Adapted from a Rick Warren sermon)