

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

---

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### Get smart - friends

Presented by Michael Jensen

#### I

What kind of friend are you? And what kind of friends are your friends? What would it look like to be wise in your friendships? It is pretty obvious to most of us how important friends are: if you have good friends you have confidence in your place in the world. Friendship is a basic human need, without which it is almost impossible to survive: even Tom Hanks on *Castaway* made a friend - Wilson - out of a volleyball. Your family *has* to love you, but your friends choose to love you – and it is that free choosing of you that makes it so good. And in the generation of family breakdown and a general loss of faith in the traditional ideas of marriage and family, friends have become increasingly more significant to us. It is no coincidence that the most popular show of the last decade is *Friends*, the theme song of which is "I'll be there for you"; and which centres on a group of people who are not related but who are in effect family to one another.

#### II

Proverbs recognizes the priceless nature of human friendship. In 17:17 we read

*A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.*

True friends live up to the theme song: they are in it when life is hard as well as when it is a piece of cake. It is even true that the loyalty and devotion of true friends may exceed even that of family:

*A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. (18:24)*

The proverb is pointing out that you can know a lot of people and still lose everything: but there is a rare species of friend that doesn't give up on you despite the stormiest of weather. A friend is there when you can't afford a life-coach anymore; when you can't buy the drinks; and when you have completely lost your fashion sense.

And the Bible points out that friends give wise advice. A good friend is more useful than a mirror, able to tell you that your rear-end really does look big in those clothes and plenty more besides. Listen to this:

*Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of one's friend springs from his earnest counsel. (27:9)*

That's a big call: the sweetness of friendship comes from the guidance you get from your good friends. The people who know you well give you good and honest advice: "he's no good for you"; "you'd make a lousy plumber"; "you are working too hard". They seek your good, not just your approval. In fact, a friend may be the one who tells you something you don't want to hear:

*Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses. (27:6)*

An enemy will flatter you or suck up to you; but a good friend is one who is courageous enough that out of love for you they may tell you the awful truth.

But how can someone find such friends? How can you spot them? Usually we don't give a lot of thought to our friends; we pick people that like us, or that we think are cool and add value to our reputation.

### III

Proverbs has plenty to say about the kind of friends you do and don't want. You ought to be careful in choosing friends:

*A righteous man is cautious in friendship; but the way of the wicked leads them astray. (12:26)*

Here are some characteristics to avoid:

Avoid a person who gossips:

*A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid someone who talks too much (20:19)*

Gossip is poisonous to relationships. A person who talks about people behind their backs and is quick to pass on information about someone else for the sake of having something to chat about is not someone you want as a friend.

Stay clear of someone who is short-tempered:

*Do not make friends with a short-tempered person, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn their ways and get yourself ensnared. (22:24-25)*

Steer away from drunks and gluttons:

*Do not join those who drink too much wine, or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them with rags. (23:20-21)*

If your friends are heavy drinkers it will be really hard for you not to be too. It is really boring to stay sober while everyone else hits the bottle. The Australian culture of mateship is tied up with "having a beer with Duncan, cause Duncan's me mate."

In Proverbs 1:10-19 the writer urges us not to be enticed by people who are prone to violence and who are plotting to harm to others. It is true in life that the crowd you hang out with affects your judgement; and if you can see that the people you mix with are acting in defiance of God, beware. If they are not wise, you will not be wise. Foolishness is contagious; and it leads you to destruction. In the NT, Paul says the same thing: "Bad company corrupts good character." (1 Corinthians 15:33)

Instead, choose friends who display wisdom themselves. Check out 13:20:

*He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm.*

How are your friends influencing you? Have you chosen your friends wisely? Do you know some people who you respect for their wisdom? Do they fear the Lord? I know that at the crucial times in my life, the

wisdom of my friends has led me away from foolish choices. It was hanging around with a group of people who were serious about following Christ that made all the difference for me. I wouldn't trade that for anything. You will have a wide variety of friends, and they all don't have to be Christian – of course! But choose for your most intimate and precious relationships friends who will help you make wise and God-honouring decisions. Cultivate most those friendships that will strengthen your faith and lead to you into habits of godliness.

#### IV

But once you have chosen friends, the business of maintaining friendships is another matter. What kind of friend are you? And once again, Proverbs has a bit to say to us about it.

There's some things to avoid.

*The one who covers over an offence promotes love; but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends. (17:9)*

It's not that "covering over" involves some kind of deception; rather it is the person who allows a matter to drop. But the person who without mercy spreads around the things another person has done drives a wedge between friends.

And stupid arguments don't help either:

*Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out. (17:14)*

But, also:

*Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down. (26:20)*

If you want to be regarded as a good friend, hold your secrets, and don't get into stupid arguments. I know that I am less likely to trust as a good friend a person who is happy to dump on someone else to me.

Also, be ready to say what needs to be said as a true friend:

*He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favour than he who has a flattering tongue. (28:23)*

Do you have the courage to say hard things to your friends when necessary? I know I find this the hardest thing about friendship, because I don't like to have conflict, and I don't like the short term offence that is caused. But for the good of the other person it may be worth it. I don't think rebukes and criticisms should pour forth off our tongues; nor should we take any self-righteous joy in doing it. But we should be ready to have an awkward conversation if we need to.

Generally we don't need telling how important friendship is in Australia. We prize loyalty to mates above almost any other quality a person can have. Which is at the heart of why we suffer from so much corruption, because the lowest person in the world is a rat – better a thief or a liar or a fraudster than a person who dabs on their mates. That is, I think we have misunderstood the nature of friendship, and thought that we can sacrifice almost any value in order to keep our friends happy. But Proverbs says that the ultimate good, the ultimate reference point for us is God and pleasing him. The beginning of wisdom is not fearing your mates: but fearing God. You are indeed a good friend if you put honouring God ahead of pleasing friends at any cost.

**V**

Was Jesus unwise in his friendships? He was accused of being a friend of prostitutes and tax-collectors. He chose among his disciples Judas, who later betrayed him. But Jesus took the Biblical teaching to a new level by proclaiming "Greater love has no-one than this: that he lay down his life for his friends." (Jn 15:13) Just as he modeled for us the wise life, so he showed us what friendship is all about. And at the core of what he is saying is that the love of friend is best expressed in sacrifice – in giving up of your rights and comforts for the sake of the other. Which is of course what he himself did – for the sake of his friends laying down his own life in priceless love. And Jesus actually offers his friendship to those who would obey him. (15:14)

There is no better friend you can have than Jesus Christ; no-one who loves you like he does; no-one who gives as much for you as him; no-one you can trust as much; no-one who is an uncomfortably honest with you as he is; no-one who will be there for you like him.