Skillful Friendships

Skillful Living

Proverbs 27:1-27

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I think we probably all understand that social media is not good; it's not evil. It's like television; it's like radio; it can be used for good; it may be used for evil. We would say it's morally neutral. But that's not the same as saying it's culturally neutral. That's not true. Every medium changes a culture. Now only history will ultimately be able to evaluate the gains and losses through social media, but research and experts today identify one serious concern of how we are changing as a culture is that we are losing our ability to cultivate meaningful face-to-face relationships. One of the ways this is seen is in our dramatic watering down of the concept of friendship. I hear people say, "I have a hundred friends on Facebook," to which I want to reply, "You don't...you don't!" Unless we're dramatically watering down the term, is it just a contact? Is it just an acquaintance? Is it somebody we work with? That's not my definition of friendship. The grid I like to run it through is: if today the bottom dropped out of my world, if today was the worst day of my life, and at two in the morning I was in crisis, who do I call? Who do I know beyond a shadow of a doubt would drop everything and would be there for me...and would be there for me through the duration of whatever it takes to get through whatever I'm facing? To me, that's a friend. If you have a handful of people like that in your life, you are blessed!

That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 27. If you're visiting with us, we've been working our way through the Book of Proverbs, just taking some of the proverbs from each chapter. We find ourselves in chapter 27 this morning. Through our study of Proverbs, we have not really talked about friendship. It's not a topic that comes up a lot in the proverbs, but it's clearly a theme in chapter 27, and so we're going to specifically identify those proverbs this morning. Verse 1:

> **Do not boast about tomorrow,**
> **For you do not know what a day may bring forth.**
> **Let another praise you, and not your own mouth;**
> **A stranger, and not your own lips.** (*NASB, Proverbs 27:1-2)

Now verse 1 does not say, "Do not plan for tomorrow." It doesn't say, "Do not think about tomorrow." As a matter of fact, there are proverbs that say it's wise, it's necessary to plan for tomorrow. What it's talking about here is **boasting about tomorrow**. There's an element of arrogance to it. Jesus talked about this in the Sermon on the Mount. James talks about it in the New Testament. Basically the idea is this: I'm not really satisfied with my life today. Maybe I'm disappointed; maybe I'm discouraged. It's just not the way I thought it was going to be, but someday…. What we're doing when we do that is we're searching for some level of significance. We're searching for some level of satisfaction. We're trying to create kind of this alternate life that, "I may be kind of a loser today, but someday……" I say, "Wait a minute, what are we doing with that?" Someday? Someday I'll be successful? Someday I'll have more money? Someday I'll life for the things that matter? Someday I'll be happy? Someday I'll be generous? Someday... I know you're not impressed with my life today, but someday…. A lot of people will "someday" their life away.

Verse 2 is connected to it in that the word **boast** in verse 1 and the word **praise** in verse 2 is the exact same Hebrew word. But in verse 2: *Let someone else praise you,* identifies that person as a **stranger**. Basically the idea is: instead of living life in the future—someday—"Someday I'll be impressive," it's rather realizing: I don't know that I have someday. What I do know is I have today. Yesterday's past. I don't know that I have tomorrow. But I do have today and today matters. Today's a gift. What would it look like to live today skillfully? What would it look like today to life for God? What would it look like today to live for the things that matter, to realize today matters? My life may not be what I wanted it to be. It may be today is a struggle; it may be disappointing, but this is what I have—this is today! So what would it look like to live skillfully today? The idea then is, instead of me boasting about someday which is fictitious, if I live today skillfully, the people around me will actually celebrate the real me, living skillfully *today*. That's what verse two is saying. The idea of a **stranger** is saying this is not someone that has some relational connectivity to you that's biased; it's just a stranger who watches you and watches the way you live ordinary, everyday life every day, and is impressed with the fact you actually live life very skillfully. Now this is what I would consider like a tone for the chapter. If we're going to talk about real authentic friendships, there has to be a sense in which we enter into this realization that today matters. Today's a gift. I've got to slow down and invest myself into the real world today to cultivate real meaningful friendships.

Now think about this idea of *someday*. I'm not happy with my life today, so I'm trying to impress you with my fictitious life that may happen *someday*. There's another way we do that in our culture today. So I'm not happy about my life today. I'm not real impressed when I look in the mirror, so where do I turn? I turn to social media and I create the alternate Bryan—a Bryan that's more impressive. I clean it up; I sanitize it; I take all the mess and junk out of it, and I portray an alter ego—an alternative Bryan that frankly is far more impressive than the real Bryan. And what happens is the more I become disappointed with the real Bryan, the more I turn to alternative Bryan, and this happens a lot in our culture. This is the appeal of social media. I can create a *me* that is far more impressive, but what happens is we more and more isolate ourselves. We more and more turn to alternative Bryan, and the consequences of that are that I have fewer and fewer real, authentic, face-to-face friends, mess and all. Verses 5 and 6 then begin to talk about the relationship of friendship:

> **Better is open rebuke**
> **Than love that is concealed.** (Vs. 5)

So initially I would say, "Well I think **love** sounds better than **rebuke**." So rebuke is not talking about the agitator that we talked about last week, kind of the negative person that's always picking at everything. That's not what it means. It's the idea of correction, of reproof. It's the idea of someone who is willing to have the difficult conversations. Better is that person **than love that is concealed**, hidden—in other words love that's never acted on, love that is never expressed. I can say, "I love you," all day long, but if there's no manifestation of that, how does that change your life? How does that make your life better? How is that the evidence of a real friend? Now it seems to me we are real confused about some of this in our culture. I would say, by and large as a culture, the ultimate virtue has become being true to your self. "Just be true to your self." Therefore the ultimate sin is to deprive yourself of something you really want. So how that plays into relationships is we think what it means to be a friend is just to support and encourage you as you seek to pursue your *true self*, and the great sin would be to ever reprove, to ever correct, to ever suggest that perhaps you're off track.

We're confused because so many people misrepresent the Scripture when they quote the verse, "*Judge not, lest you be judged.*" You hear it all the time in all kinds of environments, and how people define that is, "No one has the right to say anything negative to someone else," to which I would say, "Have you read the Book? Now just think about Proverbs. It is full of identifying the behavior of a fool! From Genesis to Revelation there are two paths clearly articulated. And again and again and again people are identified as those who get off the path of life and travel the path of destruction—and the Scriptures are full of our responsibility to make that clear. Nowhere does the Bible say we should just be quiet and watch people destroy themselves. That's not love. That's not compassion. That's not friendship. Frankly, it's indifference. If you're so concerned about a difficult conversation being uncomfortable for you that you don't care enough to have that conversation for the good of somebody else—that's not love; that's not compassion. The whole "*judge not*" thing is you cannot play God and judge someone's heart and motives. You can't do that. But if someone is clearly involved in destructive behavior, I'm not judging that. I'm just stating the facts. It's abundantly clear and because I care about that person, I care enough to say something. That whole concept then rolls into the next verse, verse 6:

> **Faithful are the wounds of a friend,**
> **But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.**

Would I rather have a kiss than a wound? Yes! But would I rather have the wound of a faithful friend than the kiss of a deceitful enemy? Absolutely! No amount of money can buy the value of a friend that cares enough to have the hard conversations. Does it hurt? Yes it does. Does it wound? Yes it does. But I thank God there are people that are loving and compassionate and courageous enough to correct me when they see me straying from the path of life. The friend that is kissing you out of deceit is no friend at all. This is someone who is using you, who's manipulating you, who wants something from you. I'd rather be wounded by a *faithful friend* than *kissed* by a *deceiver*.

One of the things that verses five and six remind me of—and some of you are going to think that I am way out there—is this makes me think of where we're going in the culture as it relates to technology and robots. I first started reading about this years ago. Psychologists, people in the field, were beginning to share concerns that the lines between a robot and a human are getting blurred. When I first started reading this, I thought it kind of silly; this is like science fiction. A lot of people were laughing. I just have to tell you, if you've kept up on this, fewer and fewer people are laughing today, and I would suggest to you five years from now, no one will be laughing. Do you understand that today they are actually experimenting with robotic spouses...marriage partners? Do you understand they are experimenting with robotic sex partners? You add to that where we're going with virtual reality—where is all this going? Psychologists are telling us more and more the line between human and robotic is getting less and less clear.

So now think about what the text is saying. If I want a friend that won't correct me, that won't reprove me, but actually—because I'm selfish and I'm self-absorbed and I'm narcissistic—I just want a friend that will feed that, what's my best option? My best option is not a human; it's a robot that can be programmed to feed every narcissistic tendency I have. Those who are opting for robotic marriage partners, that's exactly what they are saying. My partner meets my every need, never talks back, never questions, is never unfaithful. Like...where is this going?

I just want to remind you this morning about your phone—it's not your friend! Your computer, your pad—they're not your friend! They can never be your friend. Your friend is a real person—flesh and blood, face-to-face—that walks with you through the struggles and messes and the joys of

life. If you have a friend that loves you enough to occasionally correct you, be thankful for the wounds of a friend because your friend is making you a better person. Verse 9:

> **Oil and perfume make the heart glad,**
> **So a man's counsel is sweet to his friend.**

I love verse 9. Think about an ancient culture. It's hot; it's dry and there's no air conditioning. The sun burns the skin; the wind chaps the skin; it cracks—that was just a way of life. So they would take olive oil and put it on the skin and it had this beautiful, soothing, healing quality to it. It was just this moment of gladness. The perfume in that culture referred to what you put on your clothing in order for your clothing to smell pleasing. So the imagery: think about your life and the struggles and the heartaches—those things that are painful—and yet along comes a friend that breathes life into your soul. It's like that olive oil on that dry, chapped, cracked skin. There's something about it that is so pleasing it just brings healing and life to your soul. Again, I would raise the question: Do you have those people in your life that breathe life into your soul...that provide healing when you are in pain...that are involved enough in your story they know when you need them and they make your heart glad? Verse 10:

> **Do not forsake your own friend or your father's friend,** [I love the wording there because it's a reminder that my friend does not have to be my age. It may be my father's friend, for friends can be different ages. Don't forsake a friend that's a *real* friend.]
> **And do not go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity;**
> **Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother far away.**

Basically what the proverb is saying is: think about the ancient world. In a day when communication was really difficult, when travel was really difficult, maybe I have a family member but they live far away. What I need is a friend that lives next door, that lives in my community. Think of the concept of a tribe, a group of people that understand, "We're here and we're in this together." The idea, then, is in your hour of need, in your **calamity**, the proverb says, "*Better than a brother who's a long ways away is a friend that's right next door*."

Now many of us have friends that live a long ways off. That's fine. There's no problem with that. They can be real, deep, authentic friends, but you should always have friends that live within the context of your community, people that watch how you live, people that know how you're doing, people that don't just connect with your pretend social media persona, but the real you going through real stuff every day.

A couple of years ago I was talking to someone who was struggling with some moral issues and I asked about friends and accountability and he said, "Oh, I have accountability partners." I said, "Well, who are they?" All three of them lived in another state! It's like, "That's not going to work. All they know is what you're telling them. A friend needs to see you, to see how you live life, to see how you're doing, to see you in your mess, in your struggle." In social media we're cleaned up; we're sanitized. I need somebody that walks with me through the junk, through the mess, through the struggle, and occasionally sees you're getting off track and offers some correction. That's the idea of verse 10. Verse 14:

> **He who blesses his friend with a loud voice early in the morning,**
> **It will be reckoned a curse to him.**

Now that's kind of a funny proverb. You imagine early in the morning when everybody's sleeping, this friend shows up and in a loud voice from the street is hollering a blessing to you. This would raise the question: "What is he doing?" The idea is: this is a *show friend*. What is he doing at six in the morning hollering in the streets? He wants everyone to know, "Look at me. I'm a great friend blessing my friend!" That isn't about you; that's about him and his desire to somehow appear to be so spiritual and to be a *show friend*. When I think about a show friend I think about it a couple different things. For some of you who are very successful—you've accumulated wealth; you have influence; you have position—one of the things you struggle with all the time is trying to figure out who really wants to be my friend, and who wants something from me? There are a lot of people who want to sidle up next to you 'cause they want something. They want you as a show friend. All you have to do is get on Facebook and look around. There are a lot of people that like who put show friends on Facebook. "Look at me. Look who I got my picture taken with; here, this is my show friend," to which I would say, "What are we doing? Why do we need a show friend?" That's the idea there. You think about people that are struggling so hard to break into certain social circles in order to have a show friend. "I want to at least pretend like I belong here; I want some show friends."

Think about those of you in middle school and high school. You can work so hard to break into the popular crowd...to what? To be identified with them. What are you looking for? A show friend? Why do we do that? Why don't we put our energy into finding a real friend—someone with whom we can be authentic and real and cultivate a relationship, someone who I know I can call at two in the morning no matter what, and they will drop everything and they will be there for me? I don't want a show friend; I have no use for show friends. I want a real friend. That's kind of the idea: A show friend is a **curse**; I need a real friend. Verse 15:

> **A constant dripping on a day of steady rain**
> **And a contentious woman are alike;**

Now we dealt with this several weeks ago. Like I said, I'm not going there again. (*laughter*) But again, this would apply to anyone. Nobody wants to live with a contentious person. It would be equally true that no one wants a contentious person for a friend. Do you have those kinds of deep, authentic friendships? Some of you are sitting here this morning and thinking, "No, nobody wants to be my friend; nobody loves me." It's really easy to turn this into kind of a pity party: "Poor me; nobody loves me." It would be much more productive to ask the question: "Why is that?" Maybe you're contentious. Maybe you're negative. Maybe you just drain the life out of the people around you. If your mindset is, "I wish there were people around me that were nice enough to be my friend," it's never going to work. You're going to suck the life out of all those relationships. What you have to think is, "What would it mean for me to be that kind of friend to someone else? What would it mean for me to care about somebody else like that and begin to think about others and cultivate that relationship?" A part of what this proverb reminds us is: I need to look at myself and maybe there are things about me that are off-putting to people and things where I need to grow and change.

Having said all that, I want to run back quickly to verse 7. Now, with a sense of friendship, what it is, what it involves, verse 7:

> **A sated man** (somebody who is full, who's beyond full) **loathes honey,**
> **But to a famished man any bitter thing is sweet.**

What the proverb is saying is if you're so full you think you're going to be sick, then you loathe the thought of honey, which biblically would be considered healthy and sweet, enjoyable. You're so full of something that you don't have room for something good. The contrast with that is you're so famished, even what's bad in that moment tastes good. Now think about this as it relates to friendship. We get so busy, our lives get so full, we've got so much going on that we just don't have time for something good. It's like I can't fit one more thing into my schedule. If you do not have deep, authentic, meaningful friendships, your life is greatly diminished. It's a tragedy that we're so full of everything else that we don't have the taste or the time for something that would be so good for us. The alternative is you become so socially starved, so desperate that you start to think even a bad friend is better than no friend, which is equally tragic. So that verse is a warning that I need to make room in my life for friends, but I need to be thoughtful. I want good friends. That takes us back to verse 17:

Iron sharpens iron,
So one man sharpens another.

In the ancient world they used iron to sharpen iron—tools, implements and weapons—things like that. This is a familiar proverb but it is a reminder we're talking about friendship—friendship that corrects us, occasionally has to wound us, friendship that's like oil on our dry and chapped skin, friendship that requires commitment and authenticity. You say, "Well yeah, I know what you're talking about. I have some friends that I hang out with." I'm not talking about *hanging out*. "Oh, yeah, I know what you're talking about; I have some friends that I fish with." I'm not talking about *fishing with*. I'm not just talking about people you know; I'm not just talking about people you spend time with; I'm not just talking about people you hang out with. There's nothing wrong with that. Good for you! I'm talking about a real friend that moves below the surface and has meaningful conversations, that gets into the real stuff of life, that is there to make you better, that sharpens you, that motivates you, that grows you, that encourages you, that challenges you and occasionally corrects you. That's a whole other level of relationship! Not through texting, not through e-mail, not through social media, but face-to-face, eyeball-to-eyeball, real human friendship. It's staggering how many people in our culture don't have that. Two more: Verse 19:

As in water face *reflects* face,
So in the heart of man *reflects* man.

A very interesting proverb! What it is saying is: when I look into the water, I see my reflection; it's like a mirror. So how do I actually see myself clearly in real life? It's not going to happen on Facebook or social media; that's kind of the *fake me*. How do I actually reflect the *real me*? One of the challenges is that most of us are not real self-aware; we're just not. We think we are. We look in the mirror; we see ourselves; we think we've got it all figured out but the people around you would say, "I don't think so." They see a whole different you that we're often clueless to. So how do we genuinely, authentically evaluate ourselves and keep growing? The answer is in the proverb. It happens when we are face-to-face with another person. That becomes the mirror. That becomes the reflection. A real, authentic friend that really knows me—messes and junk and all—is my best reflection. They see who I really am. They see how I really live my life. They see my real tendencies, and without that I continue to be somewhat clueless about who I am as a person. How serious is that? Verse 21:

The crucible is for silver and the furnace for gold,
And each is *tested* by the praise accorded him.

Basically that is saying—it's a familiar imagery in Proverbs—that you put the silver and the gold in the furnace. It heats up; the impurities come to the surface, and what remains is pure gold. So the idea is you are ultimately exposed for who you really are in times of trial and adversity. When you're going through the fire, that's when everything is burned away and we get to see who you really are. What will be necessary for, in that moment, you to emerge as gold? The answer in Proverbs 27 is friendship. Friendship! It's friends that have walked with you, that have corrected you, that have encouraged you, that have challenged you, that have counseled you, that have sharpened you, that have accurately reflected you to grow you so, in your hour of need, not only do you have someone you can call, but in your hour of need there is someone who has helped prepare you to go through the fire. Life without authentic friendships is a life that is diminished and a life that will be ill-prepared to go through the fire when you face your calamity.

I would say this morning: if you have a handful of those kinds of friends, you are blessed. I'd suggest you take a little time this week, contact them and just let them know, "I'm thankful I have you as my friend." Again, some of you this morning would say, "I don't have any," and a relevant question would be, "Why is that?" The danger is turning it into a pity party. "Nobody loves me." It's much more productive to think, "Why is that? What needs to change?" And rather than you thinking everybody needs to be your friend, why not turn that around and start thinking, "What would it mean for me to be that kind of a friend to someone else? Proverbs 27 is very helpful for that.

And finally, ultimately, the Friend of all friends that our soul ultimately longs for was captured in the words of the great hymn writer, *"What a Friend we have in Jesus."* One of the great theological concepts of the New Testament is captured in the term *reconciliation*. Literally the term means from enemy to friend. Jesus said, *"I'm a Friend that sticks closer than a brother."* Jesus said, *"I will never leave you or forsake you.*" Through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, He offers salvation freely as a gift. God gave up His own life to pay for your sin in order that you might go from enemy to friend—the ultimate Friend. Until you have found that ultimate friendship in Jesus, no human friendship will ever fully satisfy. The message of the gospel is: God has made it possible through Jesus, freely offered as a gift. It's yours this morning if you want it. That is the best news ever!

> *Our Father, we celebrate that when we were Your enemies, You gave up Your Son that we might become Your friend. God, that's the ultimate friendship. Lord, I pray for all of us that we would not only cultivate a deep friendship with You, but with others around us, that we might be made ready for our day of calamity. Lord, give us the wisdom and the skill we need to carry this out. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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