



# Building Godly Friendships

The book of Proverbs addresses many topics that literally “hang in the balance”—things like our words and possessions; things that tend to hold particular sway and power in our lives. Proverbs presents these topics as having the potential to be used for either great evil or great good. And they take a whole lot of skill to handle wisely. The same holds true for our friendships. Peer pressure is a powerful influence. And it isn’t just young people who struggle with peer pressure; it remains an issue into adulthood. In fact, friends continue to be one of the most powerful influences for all of our lives. They, too, hang in the balance—a source of great good or great evil.

As a whole, much of what Proverbs teaches goes back to relationships. How we view possessions, how we use our words, our self-control or lack thereof, our personal choices to walk in wisdom or to walk in foolishness—all are tied in some way to our interaction with other people. And at the very center of it all lies our most important and foundational relationship—our relationship with God Himself. God wants us to see the topic of friendship through the lens of our relationship with God. Walking in the fear of the Lord has a very practical application in how we form and build relationships.

With Proverbs as our “coach,” let’s dig into what God says about our friendships. This study isn’t designed to be done all at once. Consider working through it a little at a time over the course of several days or even weeks. While the following study will include just a sampling of all that God says to us on this topic, part two of this study will enable you to dig even deeper into God’s wisdom so you can learn the godly skill of both choosing and being the right kind of friend. Before you begin, ask the Lord to help you understand and rightly apply His Word.

## What is a Friend?

Let’s start by defining our terms. The writers of Proverbs used a variety of Hebrew words that are translated *friend* or *neighbor* in our English Bibles. A few of them are listed below. Use a word study tool<sup>1</sup> to look up definitions for the following words (the Strong’s number is listed for you):

- **friend** (H7453; Hebrew = *rea’*. This is the word most commonly translated *friend* in Proverbs, also often translated as *neighbor* or *companion*.<sup>2</sup>)

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- **companion** (H7462; Hebrew= *ra’ab*; Proverbs 13:20, 28:7, 29:3)

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<sup>1</sup> One great place to look up the original meaning of Bible words: <https://www.blueletterbible.org/>. In the search bar simply put in the Strong’s number, such as “H7462” and it will lead you to the Hebrew word and definition for which you are looking.

<sup>2</sup> Found in: Proverbs 3:28-29; 6:1, 3; 11:9, 12; 12:26; 14:20, 21; 16:29; 17:17, 18; 18:24; 19:4, 6; 21:10; 22:11; 24:28; 25:8, 9, 18; 26:19; 27:9-10, 14; 29:5).

- **friend** (H157; Hebrew= ‘ahab; Proverbs 18:24; 27:6; 14:20)

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- **close friends** (H441; Hebrew= ‘alluwph; Proverbs 2:17; 16:28; 17:9)

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- **friends** (H4824; Hebrew= merea’; Proverb 19:7)

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- **companion** (H2270; Hebrew=chaber; Proverb 28:24)

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These various Hebrew words describe all kinds of different relationships—and even levels of relationships—we might have with people. Some are just acquaintances with whom we rub shoulders occasionally, while others are close companions whom we know well. Using the definitions above with the different shades of meaning they provide on this topic, put in your own words what you think a “friend” is. What seems to determine the level of intimacy/involvement people have with each other?

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Although Proverbs has a lot to say about how to be a good neighbor (loving those who are close in proximity to us), the focus of our study will be on our intimate friendships—the ones “to whom we choose to entrust our hearts.”<sup>3</sup>

### Choose the Right Kinds of Friends

This may seem self-evident, but it is important to recognize that friendships are *chosen*. To “make a friendship” implies that a choice must be made. We see this principle introduced at the very beginning of Proverbs: *My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent... My son, do not walk in the way with them; hold back your foot from their paths* (1:10, 15). King Solomon is speaking, addressing his son. Being older (and wiser!), Solomon knows better than his young son just how powerful the influence of companions can be.

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<sup>3</sup> Lydia Brownback, *A Woman’s Wisdom: How the Book of Proverbs Speaks to Everything* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 78.

There is a distinct possibility that ungodly companions will entice his son to join them in sin. At some point in life, Solomon's son will be faced with a choice. The father's warning comes *early* in life, before he comes to that decision point. And the father's warning comes *often*, as evidenced throughout the book of Proverbs.

As you read through the verses below, circle all the warning phrases that communicate a choice that must be made:

**4:14-15** Do not enter the path of the wicked,  
and do not walk in the way of evil.

Avoid it; do not go on it;  
turn away from it and pass on.

**12:26** The righteous should choose his friends carefully,  
for the way of the wicked leads them astray. (NKJV)

**22:24** Make no friendship with a man given to anger,  
nor go with a wrathful man.

**20:19** Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets;  
therefore do not associate with a simple babblers.

**23:20** Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat...

**24:21** My son, fear the LORD and the king,  
and do not join with those who do otherwise.

**27:10** Do not forsake your friend and your father's friend...

Perhaps the verse that best captures the essence of this choice is Proverbs 13:20:

Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise,  
But the companion of fools will suffer harm.

"Will suffer harm" is actually one word in Hebrew. What does it mean? Use a word study tool to look up the definition (Strong's number: H7321):

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As we read through the book of Proverbs, God wants us to put ourselves in the place of Solomon's son. Just like him, we also are faced with choices about the friendships we will or will not make. This verse shows us why our choice of friends is so important—because of the consequences. Our friends will either help us grow in wisdom or they will hurt us spiritually.

There are many verses throughout the book that reinforce this truth. As you read through the verses on the next page, look for the consequences that result from various friendships. Underline the type of companion described. Circle the consequences that will result from associating with this individual.

**12:26** *The righteous should choose his friends carefully,  
for the way of the wicked leads them astray.* (NKJV)

**16:29** *A man of violence entices his neighbor  
and leads him in a way that is not good.*

**18:24** *A man of many companions may come to ruin. . . .*

**22:24-25** *Make no friendship with a man given to anger,  
nor go with a wrathful man,  
lest you learn his ways  
and entangle yourself in a snare.*

**23:20-21** *Be not among drunkards  
or among gluttonous eaters of meat,  
for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty,  
and slumber will clothe them with rags.*

**24:21-22** *My son, fear the LORD and the king,  
and do not join with those who do otherwise,  
for disaster will arise suddenly from them, and who knows the ruin that will come from them both?*

**28:7** *... a companion of gluttons shames his father.*

**29:3** *... a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth.*

We need look no further than Solomon's own son, Rehoboam, for a real-life example of consequences resulting from a choice of companions. 2 Chronicles 10:8 records that when he became king, Rehoboam did not follow his father's wise teaching. He forsook his father's trusted advisors and made himself the companion of foolish friends instead. It cost him the kingdom.

**Think Bible:** what other examples come to mind of friendships—good or bad—recorded in Scripture? What consequences resulted from those friendships?

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According to the verses we have studied so far, what should be our chief criteria when making a decision about whom to befriend?

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None of us wants to suffer spiritual harm. Since our choice of friends is so important, how can we be sure that we will “walk” with wise companions? The answer Proverbs gives is a bit surprising:

**15:31** *The ear that listens to life-giving reproof  
will dwell among the wise.*

What does our choice of companions have to do with our *ears*? Our *ears* are one of the important gateways to our *hearts* (Proverbs 4:20-27). In 15:31, the ear actually represents a person’s whole being. The individual who has a heart to hear and receive godly correction will dwell with wise people. These are the kinds of people to which his heart is drawn. Consider the contrast in 15:12—

**15:12** *A scoffer does not like to be reproved;  
he will not \_\_\_\_\_.*

Sin isolates. A proud, stubborn, unteachable heart pushes away from the company of wise and righteous people. An open ear—demonstrating a humble receptivity to truth—is one of the most important aspects of choosing and nurturing godly friendships.

Proverbs 2 concludes this way:

**2:20** *So you will walk in the way of the good  
and keep to the paths of the righteous.*

Verse 20 is showing us the result of something (we can see this by the use of the word “so”).

Look up Proverbs 2 and read through the opening verses. What is the father pleading for his son to do?

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What will wisdom protect the son from (vv.12-19)?

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Love wisdom. Seek wisdom. And you will be on the right path. You will not be on this path alone. Other people who are seeking wisdom (i.e., “the good” and “the righteous”) will be on it with you. This is Proverbs’ secret to choosing godly friends: *Seek God with all of your heart and then look for the people around you who are doing the same.* You will be drawn to each other by your mutual love for an even greater Friend.

## Be the Right Kind of Friend

Choosing the right friends is vital for our spiritual well-being, but it would be selfish to think only in those terms. There is another angle we must consider. It is also important that we learn to *be* the right kind of friend. Proverbs lists many qualities that will be found in a good friend. We will consider just a few of them.

## 1. Faithful

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

Circle the 100% word in the above verse.

What word is parallel to “friend” in the second half of the verse? \_\_\_\_\_

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

The Hebrew in this verse is a bit difficult to translate. *Ruin* literally means to be broken in pieces. Here is a paraphrase: “A man who sets himself to gain many friends will eventually be torn apart.”

This verse uses two different Hebrew words for “friend.” *Companion* in the first line is the general word for friend or companion. The idea in this verse is that seeking to have a lot of causal companions can actually be damaging. The desire to be popular is not spiritually healthy.

*Friend* in the second line is set in contrast to the *many companions* in the first line of Proverb 18:24 (H157; Hebrew= ‘ahab). Refer back to your definitions on pages 1-2. What kind of friend is this?

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Write out the main truth of Proverb 18:24 in your own words:

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**27:5-6** *Better is open rebuke than hidden love.  
Faithful are the wounds of a friend;  
profuse are the kisses of an enemy.*

*Enemy* is the opposite of *friend*. One is characterized by hate, the other by love. In these verses, what action is taken by the enemy?

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What action proves the faithfulness (steadfast love and loyalty) of a friend?

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At first glance, it appears these actions are wrongly placed. Wouldn't an *enemy* be the one wounding and a *friend* be the one showing affection? What point do you think the writer is seeking to make?

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## 2. Spiritually Beneficial

**27:17** *Iron sharpens iron,  
and one man sharpens another.*

What can you learn from the image used in this proverb? Consider how *iron* and *man* are alike.

What naturally happens to iron tools with use?

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What parallel can we draw to ourselves?

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On a practical level, how can this sharpening take place?

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All friends have an influence...be the kind of friend who influences others for good!

### 3. Selflessly Invested

*27:9 Oil and perfume make the heart glad,  
and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel.*

*Oil* and *perfume* were highly desirable commodities in ancient Israel. Used in this context, “they illustrate the desirability of friendship.”<sup>4</sup> What else was true about oil and perfume during this time period? \_\_\_\_\_

What does this illustrate about good friendships?

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According to the verse, what effect do oil and perfume have upon the heart?

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What is parallel to oil and perfume in the second line? What produces the same effect on the heart? \_\_\_\_\_

The second line is difficult to translate from the Hebrew. Some commentators suggest that it refers to how much better it is to have the counsel and encouragement of a friend than to rely on your own advice. The phrase “earnest counsel” is literally “counsel of the soul.” “This is counsel that comes from the heart, i.e., sincere...advice.”<sup>5</sup> There is a sense that this is the kind of friend who has invested himself deeply in the relationship. The guidance and help he provides in a time of need is refreshing and sustaining to his friend.

If we were honest, we would have to admit that a friend’s earnest, sincere counsel is not always what we want to hear. But a trustworthy friend who is willing to speak from the heart and say the true thing, no matter how hard, is a possession to be highly prized!

Proverb 27:9 is actually paired with verse 10, which shows another value of trustworthy friends: they

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Stevenson, *A Commentary on Proverbs* (Greenville: BJU Press, 2001), 378.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

can be counted on for support during difficult times. “Both these proverbs praise friendship and encourage the cultivation of deep and loyal friendships.”<sup>6</sup>

**27:5-6** *Better is open rebuke than hidden love.*

True friends tell each other the truth—even when it may be hard to hear. Love that is “hidden” (27:5) is “morally useless.”<sup>7</sup> It is spiritually harmful to our friends—the ones we claim to love the most—when we will not speak the truth that would help them grow and change.

Why do you think we are often not willing to take this step with our friends?

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#### 4. Sensitive

**25:17** *Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor’s house,  
lest he have his fill of you and hate you.*

**27:14** *Whoever blesses his neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning,  
will be counted as a cursing.*

**25:20** *Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day,  
and like vinegar on soda.*

Consider the various images used in the above Proverbs. How do these images illustrate what can happen in a relationship? List some possible consequences to insensitivity in a friendship:

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There is much more we could discover about being a faithful, spiritually beneficial, selflessly invested, and sensitive friend. And there are many other qualities of a true friend—both from the positive and negative perspective—found in the book of Proverbs. But even from our quick glance at what makes a good friendship, one thing is crystal clear—quality friendships are rare. Something this good doesn’t happen by accident. Time and effort are required to cultivate the kind of friendships that glorify God. May we learn to be faithful and true friends!

### Our Truly Faithful Friend

Friendships are one of God’s gracious gifts to us as people made in His image. He designed us to live together in community, not alone. This gift can be the source of so much blessing and encouragement. And yet, as we are prone to do, we often allow our friendships to take the place only God should have in our lives. We so easily make the exchange of worshiping the *gift* instead of the *Giver* (Romans 1). Do you ever look to friendships for security, affirmation, status, to feel needed or loved, or to obtain possessions? “God didn’t design friendships as a means for self-gratification.”<sup>8</sup> We need to guard our friendships so

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<sup>6</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Proverbs* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2006), 478.

<sup>7</sup> Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1965), 165.

<sup>8</sup> Brownback, 81.



that they point us to the Savior instead of taking His place.

Proverbs also teaches us that our dearest friendships need to be guarded from other evils as well. The strongest term for friend in the Old Testament is *‘alluwph*—a bosom companion. But when you look at the verses that use this word, they show us that even the closest of friendships are not immune to betrayal, distance, and strain (2:17, 16:28, 17:9). “Because of the value of friendship, most of the teaching about friends/neighbors warns against behavior that will hurt a relationship and encourages proper behavior toward a friend.”<sup>9</sup> Even something as simple as thoughtlessness can drive a wedge between good friends. Unless addressed, that wedge will grow. Festering hurts can become so embedded that they are difficult to overcome.

Proverb 20:6 says, *“Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love, but a faithful man who can find?”*

Even our best friendships are susceptible to problems. Does that mean we should shrink back from any effort to develop close relationships with others in order to protect ourselves from being hurt or disappointed? No, close friendships are a gift from God that He wants us to eagerly pursue. But like every good thing we experience in this world, the brokenness we often experience should make us long for what is unbroken. Proverbs’ description of what friendship should be like might cause us to throw up our hands in despair: *“How can I ever be or find that kind of friend?”* And in one sense that is precisely the point. There is only one perfect, truly faithful friend: *Jesus*. And Proverbs’ teaching on friendship ultimately points us to Him.

Jesus modeled true friendship: He selflessly invested in the lives of His 12 disciples; was faithful in His relationships with Peter, James, and John; showed sensitivity to the needs of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus; influenced Zacchaeus spiritually...we could go on and on. The common denominator in all of these examples is that each person Jesus chose to befriend was a sinner. Jesus came to be a friend to sinners (Luke 7:34). That includes us! He came to be our friend. And what kind of friend is He? The kind of friend who will never leave us or forsake us. The kind of friend who is always trustworthy. The kind of friend who sticks closer than a brother. He never disappoints. He never changes. The greatest expression of friendship, as Jesus stated, was also fulfilled by Him: *“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends”* (John 15:13). At the last supper, just hours before He went to the cross, Jesus declared a new kind of relationship with His disciples: *“No longer do I call you servants...I have called you friends”* (John 15:15). And then He went and showed us that He really meant it.

## Respond to God

Take time to review what you learned from God’s Word. Record your responses in a journal.

- Are you the right kind of friend? What are the qualities you need to develop in order to be a true friend to others?
- When evaluating your closest relationships, are there any changes you need to make? Do your friends encourage you to love and obey God, or do they draw your heart away from Him? Are there any ungodly friendships you need to forsake?
- Are there any areas of sin struggle in your life that you can trace back to wrong friends?
- Take time to praise God for giving you a trustworthy, faithful Friend in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>9</sup> Longman, 556.