

Four Myths About Friendship

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[0 : 00] Well, tonight I'd like us to turn back to Proverbs 27. We're going to look at several verses throughout this chapter, Sanctification, and many, many more like that, that capture some of the core truths that lie at the heart of how the gospel works.

There's also important words connected to practical application, so we'll think and talk and try to learn a lot about prayer, about evangelism, about discipleship, about mission. And there's also words throughout the Bible that serve as a warning to us, words like sin, idolatry, bitterness, quarreling, many more like that.

The Bible has got a lot to say about all these words and many more. And maybe some of these words are quite theological, I suppose.

They're maybe not everyday words that we always use. Tonight, though, I want us to focus on a very everyday word that the Bible does say a lot about.

It's a word that lies at the very heart of the gospel. It's a word that's crucial for our relationship with God and with one another. And it's a word that's so important for our discipleship, and yet it's so easily overlooked.

[1 : 34] Tonight, I want us to think and talk about friendship. And I've got three very brief introductory points that we'll go through super fast. Number one, the Bible has a lot to say about friendship.

And sometimes that comes through narrating accounts of friendship. So you have David and Jonathan. You've got Daniel and his companions. You've even got Jesus and his disciples. You see wonderful patterns described in the narratives of the Bible.

Other times, like in the book of Proverbs, the Bible gives us lots of teaching about what friendship looks like. And so friendship is a very important biblical theme. Second introductory point is that friendship is a crucial aspect of the gospel itself.

In fact, the whole gospel, we could say, is directed towards restoring friendship. And the technical term that we use for that is the word reconciliation. And reconciliation is capturing the idea that enmity is exchanged for friendship.

And that has a vertical and a horizontal dimension. So vertically, the friendship is restored between us and God. The enmity that sin has brought between us and God is removed.

[2 : 48] It's exchanged for friendship. And that relationship is restored vertically. But there's also a horizontal reconciliation. And friendship is restored between one another.

And both of these are massively important in the gospel. So friendship is a big part of the gospel itself. Third introductory point is that friendship is very easily misunderstood. And that's a surprising truth.

Because we all have friends. And friendship has been part of our lives for as long as we can remember. And yet it's very easy to misunderstand how it works.

And that's what I want us to think about, especially tonight. And our title is Four Myths About Friendship. And these myths are addressed in Proverbs 27.

And I hope that looking at these is going to give us a better understanding of friendship. And a better understanding of the gospel. So what are our four myths about friendship?

[3 : 49] Well, they are self-promotion is impressive. Resentment is harmless. Correction is unkind. Isolation is safer.

We're going to look at each of these one by one. So first of all, thinking about this idea in verses 1 and 2 that they all read for us.

Now, these verses are touching on behavior patterns that can affect us at any stage in life.

And all of it connects with the gravitation in our human hearts, our sinful hearts, that tends towards self-promotion, towards pride, boasting, and a desire to exalt ourselves.

And we struggle with that desire in various different ways and to a different extent. But the key point in relation to friendship is that we think that that promotion of ourselves is going to be impressive to other people.

[5 : 01] We think that it's going to endear them towards us. And we think that as a result of that, it's going to increase our sense of popularity and our sense of self-worth.

Now, these two verses, I think we can maybe say, touch on two aspects of the same issue. So verse 1 is speaking about boasting about tomorrow.

So there's a kind of anticipatory aspect to this. Looking ahead, boasting about what's going to take place. In many ways, it's kind of the behavior that sort of says, listen to what I'm going to do.

And that's a very easy tap to fall into. That there's this kind of presumption, maybe an overconfidence, and an attempt to set the narrative before the event itself has actually occurred.

So there's that kind of looking forward aspect in verse 1. Verse 2, we could maybe say, is touching on the response to things that have already taken place, that we've already accomplished.

[6 : 03] And we're being warned that if we do accomplish something, praise should come from others rather than from our own mouth. So if verse 1 is basically saying, you know, look at what I'm about to do, verse 2 is saying, look at what I've already done.

And these are two aspects of the same pattern of behavior. Both of them are very easy taps to fall into.

And we do it because we think it's going to be impressive. And you see this in humanity's behavior at every age and stage. So young children fall into this pattern very easily.

So often you'll maybe hear little kids and they're lining up for a race, I'm going to win! I'm going to come first! And then if they do win, if they're successful, they boast about it, and they think it's going to impress others.

Teenagers face this challenge even more. And so whether it's clothes or phone or school grades or where you've been or what you've done, so often there's this urge, this pressure to sort of show that off to other people, to make sure that other people know about what you've done, to declare this confidence about what you're going to do, or this magnification of what you've done.

[7 : 21] Social media has a field day with this kind of mindset, and everybody thinks it's going to make me more popular. And it's very, very common in high school, but it does continue into adulthood as well.

I remember back in my engineering days, sometimes you'd have to go and work in situations where you would meet with other people from other companies, and sometimes it would be people who'd come from all over the country for a particular job.

And you'd be meeting people, you'd be talking to people, and they would just drop into the conversation where they'd been, or what they'd done, or what they'd accomplished. And it was all an attempt to be impressive.

And it can even happen in church. It can happen with individuals, and it can happen with congregations, where we want to sort of exalt what we've done, and we think it's going to impress people.

In all these situations, the intention is the same. Whether it's the P1 saying, I'm going to win, or whether it's the congregation wanting to promote how many members they've had, or how many people are coming, or whatever it might be, we're all doing it for the same reason.

[8 : 26] We're doing it to be popular. In friendship, we think that self-promotion is impressive, and the Bible is telling us that that correlation is a myth.

And that myth is based on two big mistakes. First of all, it's based on the wrong understanding of what people find impressive. And this is where it's so ironic, because people don't find boasting impressive.

If you go online tonight, and you go into someone's social media profile, and you see this incredible list of impressive things that they've done, or if you go and look at their LinkedIn profile, and there's all this long list of what they've done, that is not impressive.

It's irritating. And we assume that it's going to be impressive, but nobody finds it impressive. It gets on your nerves. It's annoying. More importantly, though, all of this is based on a wrong understanding of friendship, because this pattern of boasting about tomorrow, or singing our own

praises, as verse 2 describes, it's all based on the false assumption that our worth is tied to our achievements.

And the Bible makes it so magnificently clear that that's not true. That's the big mistake that lies behind this myth, that self-promotion is impressive. You're thinking, my worth is tied to what I achieve.

[9 : 53] The Bible says that's not true. That is not true. And thank God it's not true. There's a brilliant example of this in Philippians chapter 3.

Paul finds himself dragged into a popularity contest, because the Philippians have heard Paul, but they've also heard some false teachers who've come after him. This is very often the pattern that prompts the writing of Paul's letters.

He's preached the gospel to a community, but then other people have come in and given a distorted gospel. And Paul finds himself dragged into this popularity contest, whereby there's this kind of comparison between Paul's credentials and the credentials of the false teachers.

And they're trying to outmuscle Paul to sort of say, well, you know, we've got more to say. We've got more authority. You should listen to us. And so in response to that, in Philippians 3.9, Paul lists this massive CV of Jewish credentials that he's got.

This is Paul's Jewish spiritual CV. He speaks about confidence for the flesh here. He says, other people might have confidence in the flesh. I've got more. Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, Hebrew of Hebrews, Pharisee, persecutor of the church, blameless, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

[11 : 07] This long, long list that far exceeds his opponents. And yet at the climax of his argument, Paul says, all of that is like a pile of rubbish.

And literally, the word that's translated rubbish is actually the word for done. All of that's a pile of done. That's what Paul says. Because that's not what makes us impressive.

That's not where our sense of worth lies. And all of this is to say that the pattern of the gospel is so different from the mindset that thinks that self-promotion is impressive. Jesus makes this so clear. He says, if you want to be first, you should be last and servant of all. The one who exalts himself will be humbled. The one who humbles himself will be exalted. Of course, nobody modeled that more clearly than Christ himself.

Later on in chapter 27 of Proverbs, we see that actually getting praise can be quite risky. And so, as that verse describes, the crucible is for silver, a furnace is for gold.

[12 : 10] And a furnace like that's going to do two things. It's either going to do gold good in that it'll refine it or it'll actually do harm to something that's dross. And so, praise brings us into that dangerous situation where it can be healthy or it can be destructive.

And we're being reminded that in our friendships, God's not wanting us to go around seeking to impress, seeking popularity, or craving praise.

And the crucial point is this. The gospel liberates you from needing to be impressive. And that is so important because in school, at work, we can be imprisoned in this world where there's so much pressure to be popular, to be impressive, to fit in, and the gospel liberates you from that.

Because it tells us that, you know, anything that's actually impressive in our lives, it's come from God anyway. He's the source of it. But even more importantly, the gospel teaches you that you are already of immeasurable value to God.

You're already priceless to Him. And so you never have to prove your worth or be impressive. This idea that self-promotion is impressive is a myth.

[13 : 38] Our second myth is that resentment is harmless. This takes us to verse 3 and 4. A stone is heavy and sand is weighty, but a fool's provocation is heavier than both.

Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy? So verse 3 speaks there of a fool's provocation. And that's kind of just conveying the idea of something that causes you to be vexed or frustrated.

And then verse 4 speaks of jealousy, and that's the language of longing, craving for something. And so perhaps we could say that if we're sort of just summarizing these or simplifying these verses, we could say that verse 3 is speaking about frustration at bad things that have happened to us.

And then verse 4 is speaking about good things that we wish would happen to us. And both of them are speaking about our tendency to fall into a mindset of resentment.

And the big danger that we can face in our friendship is that we can think that resentment is harmless, and sometimes we can even think that resentment is helpful.

[14:51] So someone hurts us or they disappoint us or they frustrate us, then sometimes we can just kind of mark them in our minds.

Or sometimes we'll see success in other people and they'll get the things that we longed for and were consumed by envy. And it's so easy in those situations to think that the kind of flickers of resentments in our hearts are going to soothe us like a warm fire.

But of course, those kind of flickers can so easily get out of control and instead of us being warmed, we're actually burnt and harmed.

And so it's so easy for resentment to just escalate into bitterness, paranoia, and unforgiveness. And the imagery of verses 3 and 4 is actually making it clear that this whole idea of resentment is not harmless at all.

And so verse 3 is using the image of something that's heavy. And so it's kind of the idea to have in your mind for that is the idea of being crushed and burdened, that getting resentment against somebody who we think is an idiot or somebody who's just trying to get at us.

[16:04] If we're letting that get to us, it's actually going to crush us. And that word for overwhelming is actually the word for a flood. And it's the idea that wrath is cruel, it can hurt us, anger is like a flood, it can wash away, but jealousy is actually even worse than them both.

And so it's speaking very much of how damaging it can be. And the big point, I guess, that these verses are getting to is that resentment is not a weapon that we can take up and just use at will. Resentment is actually a threat that's pointing towards us and that can easily harm us. And again, this is an easy trap for us to fall into in our friendship.

So, in some ways, maybe verse 3 and 4 is like the corresponding danger to verse 1 and 2. So, you know, in verse 1 and 2, it's maybe getting us to think, you know, we might see a friend who's boastful, trying to show off, trying to be impressive.

Verse 3 and 4 is maybe challenging us about the response whereby, you know, we can actually be quite irritated and quite resentful and we can become quite bitter towards people and when that happens, we're falling into a mistake.

[17:22] And all of it's rooted in believing the myth that resentment is harmless. Resentment's not harmless. It's not harmless at all.

And again, we can unpack a couple of aspects to this. The first is to say that resentment is always likely to make us behave in a way that's actually harmful towards others.

So, if there's kind of resentment in here, it's probably going to show itself in impatience or maybe a kind of coldness or a critical posture towards somebody else.

And so, resentment can make us harmful towards other people. But the second thing that it can do is that it can actually be more damaging to us as well.

And maybe the standout example of that in the Bible is King Saul in the Old Testament. He was jealous of David, deeply resentful of David, and that just sent him onto a spiral of self-destruction.

[18:27] And all of it's pointing us to the fact that the gospel is so different, and it's highlighting two key aspects of the pattern of the gospel.

Forgiveness and contentment. And so, the antidotes, there's a dual antidote in the gospel to resentment, forgiveness and contentment. And the key point is that both of these are liberating. Forgiveness is liberating when we are forgiven of our own sin and when we forgive the sins of others. And contentment is liberating when we recognize God's sovereign, he's in control, and what we have, what others have, it's all in God's hands and we can rest in that.

And of course, the amazing truth of the gospel is that if you're a Christian or if you become one, then God has already fully forgiven you. And God is forever totally content with you as his child.

And that's the amazing power of the cross. And you must remember this, the cross doesn't just make us happy. The cross brings us into a condition whereby God is deeply happy with you as well.

[19:42] And to put it all another way, maybe at the root of this myth is the danger of comparison. We look at our friends, we compare, and all too quickly we resent.

And that resentment is never harmless. The gospel calls us to a far better way. Myth number three is that correction is unkind.

Here we come to the words of five and six in the words of verse nine. Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend. Profuse are the cases of an enemy.

And in verse nine, oil and perfume make the heart glad, but the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel. Now here, it's very important to get our myth right.

If I say correction is painful, that's not a myth. That's definitely true. Because being corrected is hard and it makes us feel uncomfortable, it can feel very embarrassing, and it can easily leave us feeling bruised.

[20 : 44] Correction is definitely painful. But if we think that correction is unkind, then that's a myth. Because this is actually a key part of what the Bible expects friendship to look like.

Again, Paul's a great example of this. He's writing to churches and again and again he's having to correct them, sometimes quite firmly, but all of that is because he cares for them and all of that is for their good.

And the language in these proverbs on the screen just now can help us to see that sometimes it's very true that being flattering and positive and saying nice things, that's easy.

but faithfulness and true sweetness comes through earnest counsel through the wisdom of a friend even when they're saying something that's difficult.

And sometimes the love of a true friend will be seen most clearly not when they're complimenting us but actually when they're correcting us. Now, there's of course a danger that we can go too far and we can slip into a kind of critical spirit.

[21 : 55] These verses are not giving us an excuse for that. But it is highlighting a key point that a culture of criticism needs to be replaced with a culture of kind correction.

And that's definitely one that we want to tie and foster whereby we help guide one another and keep one another following the Lord.

All of this ties in with one of the big doctrines of the gospel the doctrine of sanctification.

Sanctification is teaching us that every day the Holy Spirit is working to make us more and more like Jesus.

And as part of that process as with everything else that God does he uses means and one of the means that the Lord will often use is our friends. Often that can feel uncomfortable but as we said that does not mean that it's harmful.

Hebrews 12 11 speaks of that very powerfully. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant but later it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

[23 : 04] So if we think that correction is always unkind then we're believing a myth. Our friendships with one another will grow stronger and deeper when we walk more closely with each other.

We allow one another to speak into our lives. We have appropriate accountability and we're ready to listen to the faithful warnings that come through the words of a friend.

So myth number one self-promotion is impressive. Myth number two resentment is harmless. Myth number three correction is unkind. That takes us to our fourth and final myth isolation is safer.

That takes us to verses 8 10 and 17. Like a bird that stays from its nest is a man who stays from his home. Do not forsake your friend and your father's friend and do not go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity.

Better is a neighbor who's near than a brother who's far away. Iron sharpens iron and one man sharpens another. All these verses are speaking about the importance of contact and companionship and togetherness.

[24 : 18] Now, every one of us will agree with that. Companionship is important. Togetherness is important. Contact is important. All of us agree with that as long as things are going well.

But when something goes wrong in our lives, when we receive bad news or when we've made a mistake and messed things up ourselves, we so quickly think that the safest thing to do is to hide away and to keep our distance and to make sure that no one comes too close.

Now, we have to recognize that especially because this is a very, very prominent thing in our culture. In Scotland, but I think especially in the Highlands, partly I think because we know each other's business so much that if something goes wrong, we just feel very, very exposed and so we want to hide away.

And I think of all the, I mean, I've fallen to the trap of all of these myths, but I think I can definitely see myself falling into this trap. And sometimes we believe this myth because we've had a really bad experience ourselves where the trust that we placed in our friendship was betrayed and we

were badly let down and hurt by someone close to us.

And that's one of the hardest and most painful experiences that anyone can go through, but that's a total betrayal of what friendship should be like. But the answer is not to run and hide, the answer is not to isolate ourselves.

[25 : 56] Instead, we are to seek the help of the family that Jesus has brought us into. And this is a crucial theological point, that Jesus didn't die and rise again to make us saved individuals.

Jesus died and rose again to make us his covenant community. He died and rose again to unite us as one family.

That's why Christians start every week meeting together because we belong together. That's why Paul can speak of bearing one another's burdens. That's why the whole moral law is summed up in the commandments to love God and to love one another.

And it's all reminding us that when things go wrong in our lives, isolating ourselves doesn't actually result in protection. It actually leaves us exposed because we're on our own and we don't have people close enough to us to help.

And verse 17 especially is just massively important for our discipleship that as iron sharpens iron so we need to spend time together to help one another.

[27 : 06] Now sometimes iron on iron can be a clash and sometimes friendships will involve challenges but the Lord can use these for our good. And the crucial point in regard to this myth is as follows.

Church should never be a place where the only people who feel comfortable are the people whose lives are comfortable. church should never be a place where the only people who feel comfortable are the people whose lives are comfortable.

That is not what church should be like. Instead church should be the place where you can come and feel secure and safe whether you've had a brilliant week or an awful week.

Whether you've achieved your biggest successes or whether you have totally messed up. church should be the place where you could come and be safe.

When it comes to friendship we can so easily think that isolation is better. That's a myth. And Jesus instead has called us to love one another, support one another and to always stick together no matter what.

[28 : 22] So Proverbs 27 has got a lot to say about friendship and it's correcting these four myths. the idea that self promotion is impressive, that resentment is harmless, that correction is unkind, and that isolation is safer.

None of that's true. They're all myths. But I want to close by saying that if you believe these myths about friendship then you're very likely to believe myths about the gospel as well.

And so if we think that self promotion is impressive to our friends, then we can so easily think that we have to be impressive enough for Jesus.

That I have to have learned enough, I have to have understood enough, I have to make sure I've not made too many mistakes, and I've done this, this, this, this, and that thing. I have to reach a certain standard.

Because I have to reach a certain standard to impress my friends, I have to reach a certain standard to impress Jesus. If we think that resentment is harmless, and that resentment is this thing that's okay to have, then we think, well, okay, I can hold on to my resentment of people that have hurt me.

[29 : 44] But you'll so easily then fall into the type of thinking, well, God will also hold on to his resentment towards me. And people can find themselves in this situation where they find the mistakes of other people unforgivable, and yet they also feel that their own guilt is unforgivable.

And they're kind of crushed in this awful cycle of negativity. When we think that correction is unkind, then we can easily find ourselves thinking that if the Bible challenges us in our lives, if the Bible says, actually, you should not be doing this in your life, or you need to think differently about this, then we want to run away because we don't like it.

And if we think that isolation is safer, then we can very easily think that when we make a mistake, Jesus would not want us anywhere near him.

These are all myths. They're all lies. And the gospel is amazing for so many reasons, but four reasons why the gospel is amazing is this.

Jesus says, you don't need to impress me. You never need to impress me. And Jesus says, I am not going to hold any resentment.

[31 : 05] I forgive you completely. And Jesus says, if I do correct you, it's only because I love you.

And Jesus says, if you mess up, I never, ever want you to keep your distance. I want you to come straight to me and I'll help you.

And so, may these truths from Proverbs 27, that wonderful wisdom that we have set before us, may it shape our understanding of friendship and may it shape our understanding of the gospel.

Amen.