

***“How Do I Make Life Work? Choose Friends Wisely...”***

When I look into the treasure chest of my life, that imaginary box that I carry around that has the real important stuff in it, I see some amazing things things. My treasures. Times with my Mom and Dad and brother. Meeting my wife and all the great times we've had. The birth of my daughters and time spent with them. Times when God turned my life inside out. And some of the greatest treasures in there, in the treasure chest of my heart, are the friendships I've made in my life.

The guys I grew up with all through my life are the ones I'm still close to, the ones who know me best, they know my past, they know my weaknesses and strengths, I could tell you stories about them and they could tell you stories about me! In fact, my oldest friend, Rodney Aist, was back in the U.S. last week. He stopped in late Tuesday night and we got together. It was awesome. Like we'd never been apart.

I've also made other friends through the years and these friendships are also in my treasure chest. Friends I made in seminary like Pastor Mark and then especially in the churches I've pastored. Men who have come along side me and I along side them to challenge each other, to laugh together, to cry together, to talk of the things of God together. To enjoy and savor life together. To walk through life together.

One of the cell phone companies today, Tmobile, is really promoting the fave 5. The idea is you pick your 5 favorite people, your 5 closest friends, and you can call them as much as you want, no extra charge. So it's like a big deal now about who's in your 5 and who's not. How do you pick your 5? What sorts of things will get you dropped out of somebody's 5?! It's all kind of silly. But if you had to say who were those five people you count as your closest friends, who would they be?

You see, the Bible has quite a bit to say about friendship. And it's not about who's in a fickle little fave 5 list. But who are going to be those people that are in it for the long haul? Who is going to be there for you when life is great, and when life is trying to eat you up? Who is it that's going to be there to carry your burdens when you need them? The book of Proverbs talks quite a bit about how you pick that handful of companions who will be there with you over the course of many years, sometimes even a lifetime.

**Take out your notes and study guides...**

We're continuing in this message series that's asking the question, "How do I make life work?" Sometimes it feels like life is broken for ourselves or others and we want so desperately to make it work. What we've found in this series is that God wants us to have lives that work and offers us his wisdom to get that to happen. The book of Proverbs is a book filled with God's ageless and priceless wisdom made accessible to ordinary people like us. It offers us tools to make life work and we're looking closely at those tools. If we want to make life work we **pursue wisdom**, we **take initiative**, we **manage anger**. Today we ask the question again, "How do I make life work?" We find another tool that God offers and that is to **choose friends wisely**.

So, who is your best friend? Can you think of somebody immediately? You see, most of us have casual friends, acquaintances and work associates who come in and out of our lives. But if we want to make life work we have need to go beyond casual and develop a few close friends that become increasingly important as the years go by. Because outside of our families and spouses (if we choose to marry) these friends are the VIPs of our relational world. They are the ones that our lives become intertwined with.

The Bible gives us this image about friendship. **“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 to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.”** (NRSV, Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

This passage and a lot of others are telling us that we all ought to build little teams of people that we can walk through life with. People who help us try again when we fail, encourage us when we get discouraged, lighten our work load when it gets too heavy to carry alone, comfort us, and give us strength when we're under attack from anything. The Biblical example for us is to develop friendships and be the kind of person that someone else will want to befriend. But this is something we have to go about doing very wisely.

In fact, the book of Proverbs gives us some words of warning about walking through life with friends. In 13:20 it says, **“Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools suffers harm” (Proverbs 13:20, NRSV)**. So yes, absolutely, we should walk through life closely with a few friends. But the writer of this proverb is telling us that we need to be very careful who we choose as friends. Wise friends will make us wise; foolish friends will bring us harm.

What this proverb implies is that our friends make more of an impact on us than we might think. There’s an osmosis that takes place. We take on characteristics from our friends and they take on characteristics from us. The things that passes between close friends are things like values, convictions, morals, habits and goals. Whether we realize it or not it happens, and we end up being deeply affected by either the foolishness or wisdom of our friends. Growing up I remember friends who helped me be a better person, and friends who distinctly helped me be worse!

It’s a simple fact that we’ll increase our chances of growing in positive directions by choosing the right people to be around. But the opposite is also true. Foolish friends can ruin us. 1Corinthinas 15:33 says, **“Do not be misled, bad company corrupts good character” (Proverbs 15:33, NIV)**.

I’ve heard enough stories from people’s lives to know this is true. It’s uncanny how often people who have lives that aren’t working can trace their problems back to a choice they made in forging a friendship with a person who misled them.

The problem is that a lot of us, myself included, think that we’re the exception to the rule. We think that we’re strong enough, and mature enough, and solid enough in our faith and morals that we can spend any amount of time with any kind of person and it not affect us at all. I know I’d like to think that about myself. But the first part of that passage was written for me, “Do not be misled...” If I, or anybody else, think that we’re the exception, we’ve been misled and it could cost us big time!

The book of Proverbs is teaching us to put together that team of people who will walk through life with us. If we are ready to do that let’s look at the practical advice Proverbs gives us. We’re going to do this first by looking at the negative side. It tells us what kinds of people should **not** be candidates for our team. It tells us that if we see certain characteristics in people we should not consider them as potential close friends.

Now I want to be very clear about something at this point. This does not mean that these people don’t matter to God! They **do** matter to God and we should use every opportunity we have to impact their lives in positive ways! We show kindness, we serve them, love them and do our best to point them to God and his grace and forgiveness. But they just shouldn’t be people we invite to walk closely with us through life.

According to Proverbs 6:16-19 there are certain things we look for. It says this: **“There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers” (Proverbs 6:16-19, NIV)**.

To put this in modern terms, we need to carefully screen for people who are arrogant, those who play fast and loose with the truth, those who take advantage of other people’s vulnerabilities, those who can design and implement shady deals or illegal plans and then justify doing them, those who gossip and slander, those who love to stir the pot of conflict.

Whenever we see any of these characteristics in a person we ought to have red flags going up everywhere. This is not the kind of person we should count among our intimate circle of friends; in our fave 5. Again, this doesn’t mean that we should treat them as lesser people or insignificant to God or us; it just means that we shouldn’t give them a place of influence in our lives.

So if that’s a description of people to avoid then who do we look for? Well, they’re people who are just the opposite. People who are the flip-side of these seven traits that God wants us to avoid.

Instead of arrogant people, we look for people with **humility and teachable spirits**.

Instead of a person with lying lips we look for the kind of who **speak the truth with love and kindness**. We look for friends that challenge us to think about what we say before we say it, just by being around them.

Instead of people who use their power to hurt those who are weak, who attack people's vulnerabilities, we choose **friends who are tenderhearted and merciful.**

Instead of people who create schemes that cross legal and moral boundaries, we look for friends who have **integrity; friends who will pull us to higher levels of character.**

Instead of somebody who will disregard trust and confidentiality, we look for friends **that we can bear our souls to, knowing that what we share is safer than the gold in Fort Knox.**

Instead of a person who stirs up strife and conflict, we seek out friends that are **ready to reconcile differences and offer forgiveness.** People who are ready to work through conflicts quickly.

Does it sound good to be surrounded by a little band of people with humble souls, honest words, serving hands, good hearts, and listening ears? I hope it does. I hope that you want to walk through life with friends like that. But maybe it sounds like too much work. Maybe it sounds unrealistic. Maybe you think it's too late.

Everything I've said so far is pretty much just common sense—general review stuff that maybe you already know. But let's take this deeper. Around here with the staff we know each other well enough that when we need to have a heart to heart talk we say, "come on in to my office...and close the door." That doesn't mean that anybody's in trouble, it just means that we're going to have a conversation that goes beyond casual talk, or normal business. What I want to do right now is, in essence, invite you into my office and close the door. There are some things I want to tell you.

In 15 years of ministry I have seen hundreds of spiritually-minded, intelligent, well-meaning people search with a vengeance until they found the right **doctor**, the right **dentist**, the right **accountant**, the right **lawyer**, even the right **golf pro**. But when it came to searching for the right friends to walk with for the rest of their lives, there was no diligence, no careful searching, no aggressive pursuit. Why is it that we can be so diligent in some things but not this thing?!

Beyond our immediate families, our close friends are to be the ones who will help us to grow and find joy. They provide us with tremendous resources like insight, wisdom, counsel. They enrich the quality of our lives far more deeply than any goal we could achieve or any possession we could own.

Life loses about half its meaning when it's not shared with close friends! What good is a birthday, or anniversary, or graduation without close friends to celebrate it? What good is a dining room, a dorm room, a backyard deck, a front porch, a guest room, a lake house, or a boat without friends to fill it? We were born to experience life in a small community of close friends.

Friends are also there for us when tragedy hits our families. They are the ones we can cling to when the phone rings and the words on the other end of the line make our blood run cold. As much as I hate to think about it, I know those calls are coming, and I don't want to be alone when they do. What about you? Proverbs 17:17 says, "**A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity**" (**Proverbs 17:17, NIV**). Consistent love and help during rough times are two of the invaluable gifts that close friends—brothers and sisters—offer us. Why on earth would we not pursue them?

Two of my best friends have had parents die. My friend Kyle lost his dad, Art. And Pastor Mark lost his mom, Betty. At the time they lived in other cities, but we talked on the phone and got together. We cried together and prayed together. I did my best to be one of the people to help them carry the burden of their grief. We've gone through enough together that I considered it an honor to be there for them.

When my parents went through their divorce and all the difficult times around that, do you know who was there for me, these friends were. When my dad was sick for months and months and we weren't sure if he was going to make it. They and my friends here carried me through that. They were such a gift from God.

They were able to do that because they were willing to risk intertwining their lives with mine. They were willing to get close enough to me to feel my pain...and my joys. They are the ones that can hear behind my words, to my heart. And I can do the same for them. You see, one thing about friendship, real friendship, is that it's messy at times. Because it's about letting people into the messy places of our lives—the places where maybe we don't have it all together. It's about seeing the parts of somebody's life that they don't show everybody else. It's about being vulnerable. It's about trust. It's about doing life together. Now, don't get me

wrong! It's about the good times too! In fact, with my friends, the good times far, far, outnumber the times of grief. But they've seen it all and they will be friends with me until the day I die.

The life that you and I are living today is real life. This is the only life we get on earth. This is the one and only chance we get on this earth at this great adventure called living. The Bible says that the whole grand adventure was designed to be experienced in community. So one of the more critical decisions we face is choosing the people we're going to do this adventure with.

Start by mixing as often as you can with the kinds of people who might be potential members of your walking team. Maybe that's starting the Nooma class on Wednesday nights this month down at the Salvage Yard, or finding an adult Sunday School class, or singing in the choir, or coming to one of the women's groups, or one of the men's groups. I know of at least 2 men in our church that are a part of a Bible study group at their office.

Our goal as a church is that every person who calls this their church home finds a group of other people where they can share life's joys, and lighten their burdens, and encounter God.

I want these words to rattle some cages today. I want passive people to get fired up about friendship. To put friendship on the front burner of your life and what needs doing. Each of us needs to take initiative in this. We need to take risks. If we want to make life work we need to put together a personal development team. Take some first steps. The adventure awaits! You want to make life work? Choose friends wisely. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*I continue to thank Rev. Bill Hybels for his inspiration and resources for this sermon series. His book, Making Life Work; Putting God's Wisdom Into Action, has been an invaluable resource.*