

Friendship

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Date: 05 July 2026

Preacher: Chris Oswald

[0:00] I'm excited about this text, so I'm eager to jump in. I think this is going to help my marriage in a particular way, and if you're married here, it'll help your marriage in a general way.

It's going to help my marriage in a particular way because Angela doesn't often say, you need to preach a sermon about this or that thing, but she says probably once a year that I need to preach a sermon just on the basic mechanics of friendship, that people simply need more instruction on the value of friendship, on how to pursue friendship, and so on and so forth, and so she's going to appreciate this today.

You didn't even know I was going to talk about this, did you? It's been like four years. She's like, I'm like, well, honey, it's not in the next section of Scripture. She's like, I don't care about any of that. Preach about friendship. I think it'll help you in your marriage or your relationships. I think it'll just help you even if you're single to understand marriage in a more clearly, less culturally conditioned way.

So let's jump in. We're going to read from chapter 4, verse 7 through verse 12 to begin with. Ecclesiastes chapter 4, verse 7.

[1:11] Again, I saw vanity under the sun. One person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, for whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?

This also is vanity and an unhappy business. Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow.

But woe to him who is alone when he falls, and has not another to lift him up. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?

And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A three-fold cord is not quickly broken.

The first point this morning is, I think I could say that in the Bible, and also I'm fairly confident in most of the philosophy I've read outside of the Bible, when you give someone the job of thinking really hard about the meaning of life and the value of certain things in life, it seems like, generally speaking, whether we're looking in God's Word or in the Greek philosophers, friendship stands out as the highest created good that is available in our life.

[2:42] It seems that that is true, certainly, in God's Word, and I'll get to that in a minute, but also, even as you just read philosophy, people have been given the task or have given themselves the task of thinking and figuring things out.

It is remarkable to see that whatever place they start in, there seems to be a continual stream toward, this is the most important thing.

Cicero, the Stoics, Epicurus, Plato, they all united to say that friendship is an exceptional good, probably the exceptional good in the world.

Aristotle has it, friendship, as the top of all his virtues. He held that friendship is the most necessary thing for life.

Now, the preacher in our book here, the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes, is not given to romantic discourses in general, and he always seems to be, you know that you've heard that saying, you know, there's a silver lining to every cloud, every cloud has a silver lining.

[3:48] I feel like reading Ecclesiastes is like him constantly saying, just don't forget, for every silver lining, there's a cloud, you know. He kind of inventories life's pleasures and then says, yeah, it's good, but this.

Or, yeah, this is good, but that. And here, by the time we get to chapter four and he talks about friendship, there's no yeah but here. He just presents it as a solid, hearty good without any clouds

attached to this particular silver lining.

I think the Bible does the very same thing, at least mostly. Some of the most beautiful sections in Scripture are things like Ruth committing to Naomi and Naomi guiding Ruth through the process of courtship or marriage to Boaz.

the relationship that Jonathan has with David and David has with Jonathan. Some of the sweetest places in Scripture outline just the act or the art of friendship.

You get to Jesus, just an incredible amount of friendship language in the life of Jesus. I'm kind of moved by some of the Jesus stuff lately at the friendship level.

[5:05] Peter says, I will die with you. Everybody else could leave you, but I will never leave you. And he just says, Satan has asked that your soul be sifted like wheat, but I have prayed for you.

And after you return to me, go and strengthen your brothers. The language of friendship in the Gospels is there all along. It gets really intense, and I'm going to show you in a little bit.

It gets really intense. Closer to the cross, the more transparent Jesus is that these are his friends. These are his friends.

Friendship language. Closer to the cross, it's an incredible thing. And of course, wisdom literature, I think friendship is the forgotten theme of all the wisdom literature.

Like, what is the secondary theme of the book of Job? You know? Like, what's the story? What's actually happening? It's not about friendship exactly, but it is about friendship in another sense.

[6:14] You're reading this, and you're thinking, you're reading the book of Job and thinking you are not being a good friend. You're thinking about friendship throughout. And of course, you know, the very first kind of instruction set in the book of Proverbs is about choosing your friends wisely.

And that runs throughout all of the wisdom literature. And then you've got, you know, you've got the book of Ecclesiastes where it continues to talk about this.

I also thought about the Psalms and how, what's the deepest heartbreak the psalmists ever feel? It's almost always that a friend has deserted them or been disloyal to them.

A friend, my faithful companion, we used to walk together in the house of God. We used to break bread together and so on and so forth. I think friendship plays a pretty dominant role in the scripture.

An especially dominant role in the wisdom literature. And in Proverbs, we have all these kinds of verses. Proverbs 27, 6, Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but profuse the kisses of an enemy.

[7:19] Oil and perfume gladden the heart, and the sweetness of a friend is better than perfume. Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens the countenance of his friends. Proverbs 17, 17.

A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity. We don't understand how often Jesus is riffing off of the Old Testament. Not ripping off.

Riffing, R-F-I. You know, he wrote it so he can riff. But he grabs this verse and repackages it when he says, No greater love has any man that he should lay down his life for his friend.

It's right out of Proverbs 17, 17. You know, marriage is kind of like presented biblically as kind of the godly version of friends with benefits.

Like, its foremost goal is friendship. You know, people will often ask me, especially, this is like a predictable question from a young girl who's just gotten married or is about to get married.

[8:25] The question is, is that are you sure we won't be married in heaven? People always say that to me. And I always share this quote from Jonathan Edwards on his deathbed.

He has this written to his wife Sarah. Give my kindest love to my dear wife and tell her that the uncommon union, which has so long subsisted between us, has been of such a nature as I trust is spiritual and therefore will continue forever.

So when people ask me, well, what will last forever in this union? I say, well, it is really clear biblically that friendship lasts beyond this life.

And so friendship is just this incredibly sweet and beautiful thing. and it seems like, man, it just seems like we don't think about it as much as is appropriate for its dominant role in classical philosophy, in the scriptures, in the story of the very gospel itself.

It just doesn't seem like we think about it as much as we ought to. Now, let's talk about the way that the preacher in Ecclesiastes thinks about it because he definitely doesn't have anything negative to say about it, but the positive things he has to say about it are more pragmatic than romantic.

[9:56] That's point number two. When the preacher in Ecclesiastes talks about friendship, he does not wax poetic per se. He is thinking relatively practically.

He's thinking of what friendship does, of what friendship is good for. And it seems like he's mentioning at least three things. We'll go back through the text now. The first thing I think he's saying is that good friendship is sort of the crown of achievement.

Look at verse seven. Again, I saw vanity under the sun, one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, for whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?

This is also vanity and unhappy business. Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil. What's that last verse mean? They have a good reward for their toil.

I'm so mindful of the way that C.S. Lewis conceived of the concept of praise. You know, Lewis comes at the Bible from an atheistic perspective originally, and some of that sheds quicker than others, and he gets to the section in the Psalms.

[11:10] Well, not just the section, but he gets to the Psalms, and he sees this constant command to praise the Lord, and he thinks, why would God insist that people praise him? And he's thinking through, isn't that just some sort of egomaniacal thing of God to do to tell people to praise him?

Is it because God's really insecure, and he needs, you know, he needs the compliments? And then Lewis kind of had a breakthrough, and he realized, no, God is commanding us to praise him because praise is the final step of enjoying anything.

Praise is the final step of enjoying anything. He says that God isn't just insecure. He's leading us to the place where we find our fullest enjoyment in him.

He says this. There's this famous section where he says, the world rings with praise, lovers praising their beloved, readers their favorite poet, walkers the countryside, players their game, and through wines and weather and rare beetles.

Praise, he says, is an inner health made audible. Praise is inner health made audible. And the idea of this little section from the preacher in Ecclesiastes is that you actually haven't been given the ability to enjoy what you have until you have someone to share it with.

[12:33] The most natural thing in the world after a moment of accomplishment is to find a friend to enjoy your accomplishment with you and to enjoy the fruit of your accomplishment with you.

And so one of the pragmatic things that the preacher's doing here regarding friendship is he's just saying, you want friends because when you have the fruit of your toil, the final piece is to have somebody to enjoy the fruit of your toil with.

Second, it seems like he's also just being super pragmatic and he says, listen, good friendships just keep you safer. They insulate you against calamity. Verse 10.

Or if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm. How can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A threefold cord is not easily broken. So he's saying, if you fall and you have a friend, the friend will pick you up.

[13:42] He says, if you find yourself in a cold, desolate place, your friend can keep you warm. If you get into a fight, your friend can fight alongside you. The language here, I'll tell you, is super evocative of the general hazards associated with travel in the ancient world.

This is probably like language that have made someone think about, oh, so you want to travel with a buddy. Because all of the things that are happening here are sort of calamities associated with traveling during that day.

Believe it or not, like there were a lot of ravines when you're walking through, you know, these sort of canyons and so forth in that part of the world. There's plenty of places to fall and fall where you can't get up and fall where you need someone to help you.

Of course, you're in this desert environment where it breaks super cold in the evening. And, you know, whether you find it comfortable to think about or not, it was just super common for two guys to sleep back to back in a tent to stay warm in cold nights.

And then, of course, probably the one hazard that you are most familiar of with the ancient world traveling was just bandits. You know, people falling alongside you and taking your stuff and beating you up and leaving you for dead.

[15:06] And that's the basis upon which Jesus builds the Good Samaritan parable. And the preacher's just saying, listen, life is like a highway.

Famous song. Anyway. He said, but life is not, he's not asking, is life a highway? He says, life is a highway. No. He's saying, listen, life is this journey full of unpredictable things where you are apt to

make mistakes, i.e.

fall into holes, and not be able to get yourself out. You are apt to be in situations where you're underprepared for the hardship that faces you, i.e. it's a cold night and I didn't bring enough blankets.

You are in situations where people will gang up on you. And he's just very pragmatically saying, you want to have, you want to have friends for this kind of stuff.

Now look at verse 13. Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice for he went from prison to the throne though in his own kingdom he had been born poor.

[16:15] I saw all the living who move about under the sun along with the youth who was to stand in the king's place. Now what's the, if this feels like a change in conversation, but if you'll pay attention, what's the difference maker between the king who declines off of the throne and the young man who arises to the throne?

And the difference is counsel. Do you see that? Verse 13. Better was a poor and wise youth.

Receiving counsel in the wisdom literature is just a sign that you are wise.

So if you're wise, you'll seek counsel. And if you're foolish, you won't. So better was a poor and wise youth. This youth is connected to counsel. He's listening. And an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice.

The key phrase here, the key idea is, is that this older king has gotten to this very perilous point in aging. I want to warn you guys about.

And that is, is that, man, there is such a premium on politeness as you get older. and your friends are far less likely to be real friends who really correct you.

[17:30] This old foolish king probably thought he had dozens of friends. But through his own response to criticism and counsel and, uh, and contradictions to his thoughts, he began to filter away all those people who would speak proactively into his life.

And he began to collect a quiet cadre of yes men. And so he would have said, if he said, king, do you have friends? He's like, oh gosh, yeah, you know, I go do this and I've got guys with me.

And he had a, he didn't have friends because in one way or another, probably his own impetuosity, he began to communicate to people, don't tell me what to do.

Don't correct me. Don't point out my failures. And you collect a certain kind of friend that's not really a friend when that's the vibes you're putting out.

Whereas this young, humble man, he's still eager to receive instruction. He's still eager to have the truth pointed out to him, even to his own hurt. He's not, you know, he's not prickly at counsel.

[18:39] And so one rises and one falls fundamentally because they are in different states in relationship to the idea of friendship. Number three, third point, the prescription for, I think the prescription for the preacher in Ecclesiastes is we should be a little bit more pragmatic about the way we think about relationships in general and about friendship in particular.

One of the ways that the world sabotages our joy is that it creates highly romanticized expectations for our relationships.

relationships. And then when those relationships are broken or when those expectations are broken or not met, we become highly dissatisfied to the layer, to the point where we can almost not enjoy friendship at all anymore.

I think there are plenty of people who are incapable of experiencing contentment in their spiritual life because they have come to believe that every spiritual thing they do should feel deeply profound.

Every church service should be moving. Every devotional should have that still small voice from the Lord. That there should be consistent feelings of profundity associated with their spiritual journey.

[20:01] and so they're never able to just be satisfied by reading the Bible just because they're supposed to or going to church just because they're supposed to.

Think of how many people have lost their joy in just the regular spiritual exercises because the world of the flesh and the devil has gotten in there and contaminated your expectations and you're expecting it to feel more profound than it does.

Do you want to know something? I'll code this well for our mixed age audience but you know we do a lot we do marriage counseling and in the area of physical intimacy one of the biggest problems is trying to make it more meaningful more emotional more spiritual than it actually needs to be nine times out of ten.

there is a massive amount of expectation sets. I would say they try to make it more successful if you know what I mean than it is necessarily always going to be and there's just a massive mountain of expectations that's come almost entirely from the world and there's a clumsiness and an awkwardness to this that is because there's actually another person in the room if you will and that person is the every single movie you've ever seen and every single concept you've ever like it's just ruining the whole thing.

There's another example where your people are walking in with this like the expectations are up here reality is way below that with occasional you know moments and like if you could just experience God's goodness without all of these worldly expectations placed on any category of your life you'd be shocked by how quickly contentment will settle on your heart.

[22:01] It's probably the biggest area for this is friendship. Probably the biggest area where these massive expectations for meaning ruin stuff it'd probably be with friendship but that's why I think amongst the wisdom literature the wise are constantly telling us chill out we live in a broken world nothing's ever going to be as good as you want it to be in this world and let's think more sturdily and pragmatically about the means of grace that God has put into our life.

Look at verse 4 in the same chapter we talked about this verse last week then I saw that all toil and all skill and work came from a man's envy of his neighbor this also is vanity and striving after the wind here's the reality it's a sad one movies have educated you commercials have educated you social media has educated you you are mostly a value system built by media unless you are intentionally seeking to be transformed by the renewal of your mind in Christ and all of that stuff that's being pushed into you includes what you expect out of a marriage what you expect out of a friendship what you expect out of anything a career and it's just ruining so many really decent wholesome basic unimpressive means of grace let me give you an example the marriage satisfaction rate in

America is at an all-time low more people report being displeased with the state of their marriage in this decade than ever before is that because the marriages themselves are worse than ever the best known voice on this subject is a man named Eli Finkel and his research shows that marital satisfaction has been dropping for decades but that is primarily due to the increase in expectations a very significant increase of expectations Finkel says it this way we want more from marriage than most of our grandparents ever dreamed possible we want our marriage to do more things for our souls than any other generation in the history of the world that's his core argument and I agree with that argument for centuries men and women had extremely basic expectations for what a marriage was supposed to be is he a good provider is she a good cook these were the kind of fundamental entry points to understanding whether this could be a good match and people were equipped with layers of manners and decency and courtesy and self control and they were good they knew that there was this demon that was lurking out there called discontentment and they treated it like a real enemy and they were raised to treat discontentment like a real enemy and so they built an immune system against discontentment and so they were very wary of having massive expectations for anything they knew that that would be a thief of joy and so people would get married for the dumbest little reasons you could think of like

I liked his shirt or she made a great pie and when you would survey those people they would pour exceptional satisfaction in their marriages but Finkel points out rightly so we now need our spouses to be our everything because we no longer have a relationship with God or a relationship with other people in our own gender to supplement the relationship that exists within our marriage I would tell you this I would do a lot less marriage counseling if people understood what their spouse was for and all their spouse wasn't for young marrieds let me help you with something that's just a natural tendency I would just discourage you to take this route it is super easy when you first get married to begin to neglect your friendships outside of your marriage and it's super easy to begin to let your spouse become your social everything

I just tell you that is absolutely a terrible idea that will that is if you read Finkel's work and I again I just completely agree with this in my experience the surest way to create a dysfunctional marriage is to lose all of these meaningful social relationships that you have or need to have outside of your marriage you're just asking your spouse to tow more than what they're supposed to tow you need friends outside your marriage so again I'm being extremely pragmatic but that's what the preacher's doing he's saying who will help me when I fail who will warm me when I'm cold who will defend me when I'm attacked if that person's there that's a great relationship end of story now one thing I will

say just before I move on is that some people are just not very good at making friends and there's this famous line from the office where Michael

[28:00] Scott says one day I'm going to get married and have ten kids and they'll have to be my friends and the concept there is as follows he is not good at making friends so he has entered into a relationship where everybody in that relationship is obliged to be his friend rather than solve his lack of ability to make friends he has tried to enter into a series of relationships that are into marriage as a means of handling this major lack and the reality is is like in this day and age we have so neglected the virtues of friendship we don't talk about it very often we certainly don't teach people how to pursue friendship and so!

again these marriages get overwhelmed trying to carry a load that they're just not supposed to carry let alone like if you're neglecting your relationship with God and you need your spouse to be that for you as well so now your spouse is supposed to be your only friend and your God it happens all the time friends happens all the time so if you're in those shoes I just want to take a pause and just as a friend to a friend and you say I just have trouble making friends I would tell you this one of the things Ecclesiastes is constantly doing is it's constantly grabbing all of the hype the world has inserted into this or that good and it's just stripping the hype out it's the spiritual Narcan like we talked about last week and I'll tell you this you need to make sure that your understanding of friendship what is that well if you think about knee to knee what I mean is two people sitting facing each other sharing the depths of their hearts that is how friendship is portrayed very often what is really true also of our relationship with

God is that a great portion of how we relate to one another is we do stuff together we get out and we just do stuff together we serve together we try to accomplish things together we help one another do things and so one of the things I'm trying to think of is why is friendship awkward for many people I think again the world has just so polluted our expectations that we think that sharing ourselves getting to some sort of point of depth and actualization and our feelings inside of our feelings inside of our feelings that's a friendship go build a car together go go put some plants in your front yard together serve one another just do good together shoulder to shoulder that would be my encouragement well the conclusion of this section is simply this friendship is a great glory it does us much good it is a potent means of grace but this is key like so many other means of grace that

God uses to bless us and draw us closer to himself friendship rarely feels profound in the moment it mostly just feels like doing stuff together it mostly just feels like spending time together checking in on each other so on and so forth I think at the end of the day if I were giving you a mental model for how to think of friendship I would say treat it like food don't just shove anything in your mouth be somewhat discerning with who you're friends with that seems to be one of the main biblical lessons bad company corrupts good morals and so forth be somewhat discerning but man I really wonder if so many of us have become overthinkers in this category and that we ought to treat friendship like we treat food like well I gotta eat let me make friends I need friends let me make friends let me pursue friendship simply because it's the right thing and here's the reality

God uses those simple meals that you have that you don't even remember to make you alive to keep you alive and to bless you and to give you the strength to do what you need to do likewise there are so many means of grace that are so forgettable don't ever feel super profound or rarely and yet they're the things that keep you going that's I think the way to view friendship don't ask it to do more than it's supposed to just engage in it as a rhythm of life like you would any other I also want to say finally that because my wife keeps asking me to preach this sermon if you need help finding a friend you should talk to her no in reality we are a church we bear one another's burdens and the leaders in our church in particular are here for this so if you're saying to me Chris I want more friends

[33:09] I don't know what I'm doing come talk to a spiritual leader at Providence we will help you connect to people we will help you set expectations for how that goes and so on and so forth meaning you don't have to be great at this because you have people who care about you and will help you just ask now for communion this is the part of the sermon I'm most excited about you know Jesus is so big this is my my big worship thought this week Jesus is so big that he touches every topic and so then you get to just think about something and think how does Jesus touch this he's like he's like a giant person in a in a room he's like he's like me on an elevator in the Philippines I'm touching all the Filipinos at the same time let me show you Jesus in this passage real quickly look at

verse 7 again I saw vanity under the sun one person who has no other either son or brother yet there is no end to all his toil and his eyes are never satisfied with riches so that he never asks for whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure this also is vanity and an unhappy business two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil

I am absolutely floored that the last prayer recorded before the cross is just fundamentally John 17 Jesus asking the father would you give my friends will you help my friends share in the fruit of my labor I want my friends with me I want my friends to be where I am I go to prepare a place for them that where I am there may be also Jesus spent his dying moments concerned about his friends so concerned that he was going to go do this incredible work that nobody else could do and it was going to produce this incredible glory that no one else could produce he has the best reward because he had the best labor you know he did the best job but he gets the best prize and what does he spend his time praying about in John 17 read it for yourself he wants his friends to have the blessings of his labor that's incredible it gets better than that verse 10 for if they fall one will lift up his fellow

I have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God Jesus found me in a ditch I didn't know him from anybody I wasn't seeking him I was just in a ditch and Jesus came and pulled me out of my spiritual tomb of death look at verse 11 again if two lie together they keep warm but how can one keep warm alone it's better with Jesus because like you know this is about sharing body heat Jesus shares his righteousness with me he shares his righteousness with me and takes on my sin it's the worst it's the worst and best exchange that exists verse 12 although a man might prevail against one who is alone two will withstand him I am a great sinner but I'm also hounded and you are also hounded by a great hunter the lion the thief who steals kills and destroys but Jesus came to bind the strong man and give you freedom from the works of the devil and then at the end of verse 12 it says a threefold cord is not quickly broken now if you're you know as good as math as I am you might have noticed that we were only in twos until just now it's always two people two people two people and then we in this moment threefold cord is quickly broken the math suddenly changes

I want to point you to the reality that all friendship flows out of and that is the triune God the father son and the holy spirit the trinity the three in one this reminds me of what is probably if you want to understand the trinity the best book for you to read it's Michael Reeves delighting in the trinity it's like it's like that thick it's not too bad and Reeves whole point about that book about the trinity is is that God is love because God is a trinity love was not a project that God took up once he had made creatures to practice on but before there was anything God was in relationship the father son and holy spirit God was never lonely God was never needing to learn how to love God was always a lover God was always a friend this means that friendship is not simply a thing that we do it goes way deeper than that it gets us in touch with the very fundamental fabric of reality and with the one who made all things and if you were to ask me why is it that all these philosophers why does everybody wind up seeing friendship as central because a fundamental a fundamentally relational God made this world and when we participate in relationships we're in some ways participating in who God is and what

God is doing and so for communion today if you're a follower of Jesus Christ man it is when was the last time you said Jesus Christ is my friend Jesus Christ is my friend he loves me he cares about me he wants me to be with him he'll help me when I fall he'll warm me up when I'm cold he'll fight for me Jesus Christ is my friend what he left for you in this table that we celebrate is simply him saying remember you're my friend I love you and I've given myself for you so if you're a follower of Jesus Christ today if you if he is your friend come and grab these elements return to your seat and we'll partake of them together let me pray father God praise your holy name for who you are and for who Jesus is and for what we have in him we are so grateful for the gift of friendship as a pleasure among many pleasures it may stand quite high on the list but that is only because it is so near to your fundamental nature the father son and holy spirit we praise your name for who you are and for making us your friend in

[40 : 09] Christ my goodness what a surprising gift it is to find oneself in spite of all the sin and foolishness and futility and jealousy and bitterness and grumbling to find oneself with the Lord Jesus Christ as a friend what a gift may we be aware of that gift today in Jesus name we pray amen come