

## Proverbs: Friendship

**Big idea:** Hold on to love and faithfulness in friendships.  
It's not always convenient or easy, but it's worth it.

**Purpose:** To help people desire and cultivate love and faithfulness in friendship.

**Passage:** Excerpts from Proverbs      **Verse:** Proverbs 3:3

**Overview:** Friendship is not always convenient or easy, but it's worth it. Individualism and distraction (and a pandemic) can keep us from the gift of these relationships, but as we hold onto love and faithfulness in our friendships, we choose the way of wisdom and a life that is good.

### Opening/Overview:

Hey New Hope! Thanks for being with us today! My name is Hannah and I'm one of the pastors here.

Ok, you guys. I gotta tell you something. I made a new friend this week! I had heard about her and knew she was flying into town last weekend, but wasn't sure how things would go or if we'd hit it off, but it's been so great! She's fun and sweet and really easy-going. Can I introduce you to her?

This is Tandem!



Isn't she so sweet! We are fostering her through this awesome organization called *One Tail at a Time*. She's doing great so far. After a couple days of her peeing exclusively in the house, she's had 3 days in a row of successfully going 100% outside! We are so proud of her!

She's still working how to be cool with other dogs and is still doing that zig zag thing when we go on walks. But we're working on it. My evenings are now filled with looking up dog blogs and watching *The Dog Whisperer* on Disney Plus.

Now, let me tell you. **This whole thing is changing me.** You couldn't have told me six months ago that I would be talking to a dog in a little baby voice. I like dogs just fine, but I would have never called myself a dog person. I'm a clean person and I'm a plant person, but a dog person?

But here's the thing... the other day she was messing with one of my plants on our patio and I was like, *ah, well it's just a plant*. I'm obsessive about keeping our living room rug clean, but now it's filled with dog hair and I'm like, meh? You can ask my roommate: NOT my attitude before. **Tandem is changing me. That's what friends do.** They have the capacity to bring out the best in you, to teach you things about yourself you didn't know before, to help you to grow in faithfulness and love. **Nothing about having her around is convenient, but it's worth it.** Right? Dog people: tell me I'm right :)

Today we're continuing our series on Proverbs. We've spent the last few weeks looking at what this Book has to teach us about living in wisdom; about cultivating—not 'the good life'— but a life that is good. The sages of Proverbs have taught us how crucial it is to *choose the way of wisdom*. They've taught us *what it looks like to be a fool* and how detrimental that path is for our lives and relationships. The sages have taught us *the power of our words*—for life or for death. And today, we're going to look at what the sages of Proverbs teach us about friendship.

#### Scripture Survey:

For our scripture reading today, we're going to hear from a couple different friends sharing with us what the sages have to say about friendship:

*Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man. (Proverbs 3:3-4 NIV)*

*A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity. (Proverbs 17:17 NIV)*

*One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. (Proverbs 18:24 NIV)*

*Many claim to have unfailing love, but a faithful person who can find? (Proverbs 20:6 NIV)*

Awesome. Thanks friends! I want to focus on that verse from chapter 3: *Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. (Proverbs 3:3)*

The sage of Proverbs is saying that love and faithfulness are vitally foundational to the way of wisdom, to a life that is good. Throughout the

book of Proverbs, we'll see that this foundation of love and faithfulness is crucial when it comes to our friendships, too.

*The trouble for me is that love and faithfulness are so vague sometimes aren't they?* I want to zoom in a bit and see how the sages bring some definition to these often overused but not easily understood words. We're not going for a complete understanding of *love and faithfulness*, here, we're looking specifically for how love and faithfulness play out in our most meaningful relationships, like friendship.

The sages say, ***In friendship, love and faithfulness confronts and covers sin.***

You're probably familiar with the proverb that says *iron that sharpens iron*. I like how The Message version of the Bible puts it:

*You use steel to sharpen steel, and one friend sharpens another. (Proverbs 27:17)*

Proverbs 27:6 claims that "*wounds of a friend are faithful.*" In friendship, if we are really "doing life" together, if we're really showing up without pretense as our true and messy selves, we're going to hurt one another. It's in our safe relationships that our not-so-best selves start to come out.

I remember coming home from college thinking I was like this evolved person – until I got around my family again. Not so much! Honestly, I think that's a big reason we do family pretty well, but don't do deep friendship very well. Deep friendship is vulnerable and we will probably hurt others and be hurt in the process. We wonder if it's worth it. The sages of Proverbs tell us that it is! **They tell us that in true friendship, we actually develop our capacity for love and faithfulness.** We sharpen one another through this good work of friendship. It's not always easy or convenient, but it's worth it.

**Proverbs 10:12 says "*Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs.*"** Love doesn't ignore wrongs, but love **covers** them. What does that mean? That's a tough one to get our minds around. My brain starts to jump in and say, "*Well, what about this or what about that?*" I don't think *covering over* means turning a blind eye or brushing aside, or is like that pre-company panic of "ah... let's throw everything into the bedroom!"

I think **this kind of covering is like a bandage.** When we get a wound, what do we do? We bandage it, we dress it rather than keep it exposed and risk infection. **When there is wrong done in friendship, love and faithfulness calls us to address it—to cover the wound so it can begin its healing.** We confront

the wrong, seek to understand what's going on, and then we come together and say, "Alright, how are we going to heal this?"

I think of what God did in Genesis when Adam and Eve were hiding, exposed in their nakedness, sin, and shame. God confronted them - and then God made clothes for them. He covered their sin and shame.

In Proverbs, we see another theme regarding friendship that is just super practical. The sages say that **in friendship, love and faithfulness looks like consistency**. Proverbs 18:24 reads: *One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.* (Proverbs 18:24)

A basic quality of love and faithfulness in friendship is just being consistent, being reliable. One of the questions I think we are always secretly asking ourselves in relationships is, "Can I count on you? Can I count on you?" I see it in Tandem, my little foster pup, all the time. "What's going on? Can I trust you?" **We are created for healthy attachments.** We cultivate those healthy attachments through consistency, through showing up, for being reliable.

Sometimes that looks like having *rhythms* that our friendships can count on. One of my closest friends and I have gotten together for a walk (it used to be a run, but not so much anymore) every week for the past 7 years. My parents have a group of 6 couples called "The Supper Club" who have gotten together for dinner every month for the last 40 years. We build and maintain our loving and faithful friendships through consistency.

**That being said, being reliable or consistent doesn't mean always being available.** In one of his most famous sermons, Jesus teaches us to let our **yes be yes and our no be no**. Being consistent and reliable means we have the self-awareness and discernment to know when we can say 'yes' with a whole heart and when we need to say 'no.' It means we are consistent in our values. **I know I can count on you if I can count on you to tell me the truth.** In friendship, love and faithfulness looks like consistency.

Before we move on, let's take a quick look at what the sages say **love and faithfulness ARE NOT:**

**Love and faithfulness in friendship is not blind loyalty.**

Throughout this series, we've been learning that there's so much wisdom that goes into who you hang out with and who you choose to let impact and influence your life. Proverbs 12:26 says, *The righteous choose their friends*

*carefully, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.* Love and faithfulness are not blind loyalty. There are often relationships that we give a lot of power to that haven't actually proven worthy of it. There are often relationships we keep showing up for again and again, but it's really more out of duty or obligation or our own issues, than it is out of love and faithfulness. There might be a space for these relationships in our lives, but it will be crucial to discern healthy boundaries around them. In friendship, love and faithfulness is not blind loyalty.

Secondly, **love and faithfulness in friendship is not being a doormat.**

Proverbs 25:17 says, *Let your foot seldom be in your neighbor's house, or they will become tired of you and hate you.* Isn't that the best? Anybody know a person like that?

There are seasons of give-and-take in friendships, but pay attention to friendships that feel consistently one-sided. **Instead, look for the friendships in your life that are marked by reciprocity and keep investing there.** Love and faithfulness in friendship is does not mean being a doormat.

Alrighty. So now what? How do we cultivate this kind of true friendship?

Life Lessons:

First, we've gotta **Identify the barriers to friendship**

When Paul is writing to the Corinthian church in the New Testament, he urges them to practice forgiveness. And in doing so, he has this weird little line that he throws in there: *Forgive...in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.* (2 Corinthians 2:11)

**There are forces in our world that want to keep us from the way of Jesus, the way of wisdom.** We have to be "aware of Satan's schemes" — aware of the barriers and forces that keep us from cultivating a life that is good—a life that is truly life. By no means is this exhaustive, but I wanted to identify at least two of these barriers to our friendships these days.

**Individualism** - We read about how the early followers of Jesus shared their belongings, how they created a culture of generosity and interdependence. If you're like me, you read that and think, *well, maybe they kinda did that, but that's not really for us.* Well? I don't know. But what I do know is that our culture of rugged individualism—of 'me for me and you for you'—would have been baffling to the early followers of Jesus. **The vulnerability of the gospel**

**is relinquishing the illusion that *I am all I need*.** But even in Christianity, individualism has gotten sneaky and taken a new face:

***Christian Individualism says God is all I need.*** I might ruffle a few feathers here, and that's okay. That is a lie of the enemy. In Christ, yes, we do have everything we need. But in Christ, we are also called to be *knit into a new community*, called to reflect the nature and glory of a God who *IS COMMUNITY*—Father, Son, and Spirit.

When our culture of individualism keeps us from this calling to community, we miss out on what we were made for. We have to keep identifying and working through this barrier in order to move towards loving and faithful friendship in our lives. It's not always convenient or easy, but it's worth it.

Okay, the next barrier:

**Distraction**- The late poet, Mary Oliver, wrote this super insightful line: *Attention is the beginning of devotion.* We become devoted to what we pay attention to—for better or for worse. Our screens, our success, our bank account, our worry – or God's presence, our passions, our friendships. **We will always give our time and energy to whatever has captured our attention.**

The trouble is, our deepest values and priorities—like friendship—aren't usually the things clamoring for our attention. Distraction is the water we swim in and I can have it at any moment because of this super cool thing in my pocket called a smartphone. It requires so little of me, whereas things like love and faithfulness require a lot.

The other day when I was taking Tandem out to use the bathroom, I knew it might be a while because we were still working on getting her to 'go' outside. On my way out, I grabbed my phone so I had something to do while I waited. Gah, I hate that! My brain is rewiring for distraction. **We've gotta keep fighting for our ability to pay attention, and to pay attention to the things that matter most.** It's not always convenient or easy, but it's worth it.

Friendships are powerful. Friendships matter. The enemy targets the things that matter. We've gotta be aware of his schemes. We've gotta identify the barriers to friendship.

Second, we cultivate true friendship as we **hold on to love and faithfulness.**

Remember Proverbs 3:3 – *Let love and faithfulness never leave you. Bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.* That's kind of

intense, right? This discipline to let love and faithfulness never leave us is at the core of wisdom—at the core of a life that is good.

You might be thinking—great, a sermon on friendship in the midst of a pandemic. We can't even see each other! But **isn't this the EXACT TIME to hold on to love and faithfulness in friendship?** Isn't this the EXACT TIME to bind them around our neck? To write them on the tablet of our heart?

There's a lot we can't do to show up for our friendships right now. I get that. It's hard. Honestly, a big reason I got Tandem was that I was SO missing hugs from my friends! I was aching for that physical touch and closeness.

During this time, we have to acknowledge and grieve what we *can't* do. But then we can't miss this next step: We have to ask, **“Well, what can we do? What does this pandemic make possible?”** How have you held on to love and faithfulness in friendship during this COVID-19 pandemic? For me, it has looked like being even more intentional about being in touch with friends who don't live nearby. The pandemic has made *everyone* long-distance friends, and it made it a bit easier and more normal to connect with my friends in other states.

Another important thing for me has been to not just “catch up” with friends on the phone or zoom or on walks, but to create *new* experiences. **We cultivate intimacy through shared experiences.** Again, we've gotta grieve what we can't do, and get creative about what we can. What does this pandemic make possible?

I never imagined doing a facial with my friend over Zoom. I never imagined I would foster a dog. I never imagined finding so much joy in sitting in lawn chairs on a driveway. Maybe this time in our lives allows for even deeper communication and intentionality. Maybe it makes our consistency in friendship even more impactful. **I know it's hard to do friendship right now. Don't give up. Hold on to love and faithfulness.** It's not always convenient or easy, but it's worth it.

Now, I wonder, too, if some of you listening today are thinking, *“I'd like to hold on to love and faithfulness in my friendships, but I don't feel like I have any friends right now.”* That ache is real. I hear you, and I don't want to dismiss that desire with a simple, *“Well here's what you should do.”* I don't have all the answers for you, but I do know that friendship is God's desire for all of us. **I invite you to pray for friendship, to keep your eyes open for a person who**

**demonstrates love and faithfulness.** I invite you to keep growing as a person of love and faithfulness. Take some risks.

This fall, we will be launching another round of our 10-week small-group experience called Rooted. I'm not promising you'll leave with a best friend, but you will meet other people who are on the journey. Who knows what God can do?

**Hold on to love and faithfulness.**

And finally, **know God as your most loving and faithful Friend**

Spiritual author and priest Henri Nouwen writes, *"We can only give the gift of belovedness as much as we have received it ourselves."* I really believe that in order to participate courageously in healthy, faithful friendships, we have to know God as our most loving and faithful friend.

*Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness." (Exodus 34:5-6)*

Have you ever had to write a bio of yourself for an event or a website or to introduce yourself to a group? I say things like, 'I live in Portland and I like to go hiking!' **This is who God says He is: Compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love and faithfulness.**

God goes on to say that the sin and brokenness in our lives won't be ignored, but it will be dealt with and healed over time. Just like we saw earlier, confronting and covering over sin is a part of love and faithfulness. If we want to know what love and faithfulness looks like, let's look at God. **God is our most loving and faithful friend.**

No one has taught me more about friendship with God than an old mentor of mine named Sue. Sue lives in northern England, where she worked at the Bible school I went to before college. Throughout my college years, we would write letters back and forth every few months. We don't write as often now, but a couple years ago she wrote a little sentence in one of her letters that has profoundly impacted my friendship with God.

In response to some anxiety I was dealing with, she wrote, *"God will continue to be all that you want and need Him to be—gracious, kind, patient, loving, and faithful. Your best encourager and champion."* I borrowed her words and

made a breath prayer that I still use to this day on a regular basis: **“God, thank you for being my best encourager and greatest champion.”**

I use that prayer when I believe it and when I don't. When I feel worried or vulnerable, *I tie that prayer around my neck, I write it on the tablet of my heart* to remind me of God's love and faithfulness. It strengthens my courage and my hope that God is who God says He is: My best encourager, my greatest champion, my most loving and faithful friend.

Closing:

Love and faithfulness in friendship won't always be convenient and it won't always be easy. The kind of friendship described in Proverbs takes time and courage to grow. But Proverbs also says that this kind of friendship is like the luxury of fine oil and perfume or a cool drink on a hot day. **Friendships bring out the richness, the goodness, in life and they provide the vital gifts, the cool drinks we need when life gets hard.** True friendship is not always convenient or easy, but Proverbs says over and over it is so worth it.

I want you to take a second to think about your friendships. Maybe focus on just one friendship. *How is that friendship marked by love and faithfulness? In what ways could that friendship grow?* What would it look like to go a little deeper, to lean a little more fully into one of your friendships this week?

When Jesus was about to face the cross, He leaned into His relationship with His Father *and* He leaned into His friends. **On the hardest night of His life, Jesus asked His friends to be with Him.** During their last meal together, He entrusted them with these words:

*“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.” (John 15:9-13)*

We abide in God's love as we love one another. We love one another as we abide in God's love. It's so mysterious! Friendship with God and with others is our most precious gift. For followers of Christ, I would even say it's one of our highest callings.

Hold on to love and faithfulness in friendship. We can believe Jesus when He says it's worth it.