

## **A Friend Loves at All Times**

Proverbs 17:17-18; Proverbs 18:24

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To go through life without a friend who will stand with you in prosperity or in poverty, in peace or in adversity, and in health or in illness is one of the great miseries of this life; whereas to enjoy such a friendship is indeed a blessed comfort from the Lord. God says in Proverbs 18:24 that if you would have friends, you must show yourself to be a friend. But how do you show yourself to be a friend? God says, a friend loves at all times.

How we need to have a family full of friends (rather than adversaries with whom we continually bicker like a dripping faucet). How we need to have a church full of friends (rather than rivals with whom we compete for spiritual giftedness and public attention). Dear ones, if we are not friends (not merely by our profession), but by our words and our deeds, we will eventually distrust one another to such an extent that we will second guess and become suspicious of the motive of every word and deed that proceeds from the mouth of a brother or a sister. If we are not friends, we will eventually become outright foes.

The main points from our text this Lord's Day are the following: (1) A Friend Loves at All Times (Proverbs 17:17); (2) A Friend Loves with Understanding (Proverbs 17:18).

### **I. A Friend Loves at All Times (Proverbs 17:17).**

A. Very often it seems that we (even as Christians) practice a very strange and contradictory idea of love toward those with whom we are bound together by natural or covenantal ties. By our thoughts, words, and actions we seem to think that it is a less serious sin to offend a family member than a total stranger. Simply reflect for a moment on the cruel words you may have uttered or the offensive actions you may have committed against a family member which you would never have uttered against a total stranger. Are family members less deserving of respect, love, and patience than strangers? Not according to God.

1. For example, cursing a stranger is a grievous sin (as Christ said that we are not to curse our enemies out of personal vengeance in Matthew 5), but cursing one's parents is so abominable to God that He says that rebellious child should be put to death (Exodus 21:17).

2. Stealing from a stranger is always sin (according to the 8th Commandment in Exodus 20:15), but defrauding a brother in Christ is especially heinous (1 Corinthians 6:8).

3. What would you think of a father who fed and clothed the neighbor's children down the street while his own children ran around naked and hungry? God tells you what He thinks in 1 Timothy 5:8.

4. It is a sin to spread strife among all men (for according to Paul in Romans 12:18 we are to seek to live at peace with all men). But it is especially an aggravated sin to sow strife among brethren (Proverbs 6:16-19).

5. Dear ones, you are bound together as adopted children into God's family through the blood of Christ who died to purchase you unto Himself. Now as a member of God's family, God commands you to do good to all men (even to strangers), but especially to do good to those who are of the household of faith (Galatians 6:10). Love begins at home. God says (in 1 John 4:20) that if you can't love your brother whom you can see, then you cannot love God whom you cannot see.

6. Have we deceived ourselves in this area? This so clearly shows how much we need the mercy and forgiveness of our Savior and the power of God's Spirit to grow in love for one another. We are short-tempered, impatient, overly critical, and harsh, toward those we should especially love. But until we acknowledge this sin to be ours, we will be like a man suffering from cancer in his body who will not acknowledge he has it and receive the help that is available to destroy it.

B. What is the solution to this gross contradiction in our lives? We who are members of Christ need also to learn to be friends rather than competitors, friends rather than foes, friends rather than mere acquaintances. Our English word “friend” is derived from the Gothic term for love. The Hebrew text here in Proverbs 17:17 actually says, “The friend [not just any person who calls himself a friend, but the friend i.e. the true friend] is one who continues to love in all of time.” Let me list for you some things that love does and does not do to a friend.

1. Love covers the sins of a friend (when they are slight, unintentional, non-malicious and private) and does not gossip or spread an evil report about him/her.
2. Love is patient with a friend and does not burst out in anger against him/her.
3. Love waits to hear the response of a friend when there is a problem and does not assume the worst about him/her.
4. Love works and prays for reconciliation when there is a division and does not seek to get even with him/her.
5. Love shows mercy and does not ignore a friend when there is a legitimate need.
6. Love is content with the gifts and graces with which God has blessed one and does not envy the gifts and graces of a friend. Love rather rejoices in the gifts and graces with which God has blessed his/her friend.
7. Love cherishes the truth and righteousness of God and does not avoid going to a friend when there is a problem (even if it is uncomfortable). Love does not give that responsibility to others, but sees it as a duty of love particularly if it is a friend that has offended him/her.
8. Love thinks of what is most spiritually profitable for a friend and does not merely think of what is best for oneself.
9. Love speaks the truth in humility to a friend that is living in sin or error and does not approve of sin in his/her life.
10. Love stands upon his/her word and does not break lawful covenants and promises to a friend (Psalm 15:4).
11. Love focuses more on how one can encourage a friend than how one can be critical of his/her weaknesses. This is not flattery, but encouragement if it is true.
12. Love seeks to understand the peculiar circumstances of a friend and does not quickly form judgments about him/her. How often our judgments about others are formed by our own perception rather than by an honest evaluation of the peculiar circumstances of others.
13. Love applies the same standard of truth (namely, God’s holy law) to a friend as to others and does not engage in using a double-standard.
14. Love prays for a friend and does not harbor resentment and bitterness toward him/her.
15. Love realizes that only God can ultimately change a friend’s heart and does not nag and hound one continuously until he/she surrenders out of mere exhaustion to stop the dripping faucet.
16. Love enjoys communion with a friend and does not cherish a state of isolation from him/her.
17. Love glorifies Christ (first and foremost) with a friend and does not glorify (first and foremost) amusements, hobbies, work, accomplishments, dreams, or self. If your friendship is based merely upon common pleasures, shared interests, a mere physical attraction, or only a likeable personality, your friendship cannot glorify Christ. These things I have just mentioned may be present, but true friends desire above all else to glorify Christ.

C. We also observe from our text in Proverbs 17:17 that the true friend loves AT ALL TIMES. A true friend is not like the changeable seasons of the year—dying out in the fall and winter and reviving in the spring and summer. A friend’s love is constant in all circumstances.

1. Like Jonathan's love for David (1 Samuel 20:17; 23:16-18).
2. Like Ruth's love for Naomi (Ruth 1:15-17).
3. Like Christ's love for His disciples (John 13:1).
4. My wife related to me a number of years ago how she had endured one of those days

when nothing she put her hands to seemed to go as she had planned. She was so frustrated. Then she became so convicted for how she had acted out her frustration. She cried out to the Lord how He could love her. Out of seemingly nowhere my wife heard our 3 year old daughter recite a memory verse from the Bible: "A friend loves at all times." My dear wife was broken as the Spirit of God illuminated her understanding to see that the Lord Jesus Christ is a friend who loves her at all times. After all, He did not go to the cross to pay the penalty for our sin believing we were holy, righteous, and good. But knowing every sin that would corrupt and pollute us—knowing the worst about us He died for us, His elect. Having loved us and died for us when we were His enemies, He will love us forever having now made us the very children of the living God. Who can separate us from the love of God that is Christ Jesus our Lord? Absolutely nothing! Listen to Paul in Romans 8:38-39.

D. Finally, note in Proverbs 17:17 that the true friend, who loves at all times, is like a brother born for adversity. This continues the theme of constancy from the previous stanza. When difficult times come, the true friend doesn't desert and abandon the one who is loved. The true friend even carries if necessary the friend because as the lyrics from a song say it so well, "He ain't heavy, he's my brother." Do you find having to carry a brother in the time of adversity to be burdensome and a pure obligation? Perhaps you have forgotten how Jesus Christ has carried your sins and transgressions upon the cross. Perhaps you have not reflected in some time how the Lord daily carries your burdens and all your many weaknesses. Can you say about your brother, "He ain't heavy, he's my brother."

1. The Lord Jesus Christ is a friend born to bear you up in your adversity. When you feel as though you cannot go another step, the Lord comes to you and by His Word and Spirit protects you, provides for you, encourages you, and renews your staggering faith and hope in Him. He is a friend that sticks closer to you than a brother. He is a friend to all sinners who confess their sin and desperate need of Christ. He promises that He will never leave nor forsake those who trust in Him alone for their eternal salvation in Hebrews 13:5 (a double negative is used as the most emphatic way of saying "NO.").

2. None of us can ever expect to be a true friend to any one apart from the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. For Christ is the true friend into whose image we must be conformed. Christian love is not a natural disposition with which we are born. It is a supernatural grace freely purchased by Christ and graciously applied by the Spirit of God to all those who are effectually called unto God. Thus, to the degree that we manifest any genuine love in our lives as true friends, we have nothing in which to boast concerning ourselves. We love God and the brethren because He first loved us. Our boasting must therefore be in God who loved us and sent His Son to die for us. The amazing truth that Jesus Christ is a friend that loves at all times and is as a brother born for adversity should melt your heart and mine in utter humility pouring contempt upon all our pride rather than puffing our hearts up with pride and arrogance.

## **II. A Friend Loves with Understanding (Proverbs 17:18).**

A. I submit to you that there is a connection in thought between Proverbs 17:17 and Proverbs 17:18. The connection may be summarized in this way: First, we learn the nature of friendship—the true friend loves. Second, we see the constancy of friendship—the true friend loves at all times. Now in Proverbs 17:18 we note that the true friend who loves at all times does not always bail his friend out of every difficult situation, for the true friend seeks to understand what is really best and most spiritually profitable for his friend. The connection between verses 17 and 18 is the word "friend." Both verses deal with how we are to be a friend.

B. What is the historical or cultural context of Proverbs 17:18? What's going on here?

1. What we have here is a friend who has apparently become indebted to a creditor and who comes to his friend beseeching him to come to his financial aid by paying off the debt he owed to his creditor. For a person who paid off the debt on behalf of another was called a Surety. He stood in the place of the debtor until the debt was paid in full. Legally the debtor was no longer held responsible to make payment for his debt. The debt in its entirety was transferred to the Surety. And the formal action that ratified this legal arrangement is here referred to as striking the hands. This would seem to be close to shaking hands (but perhaps with a little more energy displayed when the hands come together). Thus, the Surety would strike hands with the creditor in the presence of his friend.

2. Now there was and is nothing wrong in and of itself for one to become a Surety for his friend in such an indebted situation. There is no outright condemnation of such a practice. It may in some situations be a true act of mercy and friendship. But the caution here has to do with a friend who blindly, rashly, without understanding, without thinking whether he has the ability to pay off the debt of his friend, or even whether it is in the best interests to pay off the debt of his friend quickly agrees to do so simply because he is his friend. This, Solomon says, is a man lacking in understanding. The love of friendship is not lacking in understanding.

3. Dear ones, here is an important qualification to friendship and love to others. Although a friend is one who loves at all times, that friendship and that love do not necessarily bind one to bail a friend out of every dire circumstance in which one may find himself/herself. For a friend may need to learn (in the school of hard knocks) that the love of a true friend is not a safety net into which one may fall after making foolish, irresponsible, and ill-advised decisions. This is what some may call "tough love", but it is a genuine love exercised by a true friend when it is not done vindictively, but rather for the glory of Christ and for the friend's spiritual well-being.

4. It is never easy to tell a friend that you cannot come to his/her rescue when there is a need, but it may be a necessary part of love if you truly care for that friend. However, when this is necessary, there must be every effort made to help by way of advice, counsel, support, encouragement, and prayer in carrying a friend through such a situation. If he/she listens and learns, you can offer more tangible help. If your friend spurns your advice and counsel, you may need to draw back for a season praying the Lord will humble him/her.

C. In closing, let us never forget that we were all in a state of sinful indebtedness to a holy God. There was no way in which we could pay off our debt to God. Every day we lived we became more and more indebted. But God had mercy upon us. He covenanted with His own dear Son who became our Surety and willingly agreed to stand in the place of God's elect, suffering the shameful death of the cross and the infinite wrath of God not for friends, but for enemies (that we might become His friends). Since we could not learn from our indebtedness, Christ bore it all for us and imputed to us by faith His perfect righteousness. May the love of our Surety (Jesus Christ) fill us so that we may know how to be a true friend that loves at all times.

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