

September 27, 2009
Know Who Your friends Are ...
Proverbs 1:8-19

In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, 11-year old Harry arrives at residential school. One character, Draco Malfoy - a nasty, cruel, self-absorbed boy - says, *"You will soon find out that certain families are better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there."* And he reaches out his hand to Harry. It's a pivotal moment in the story. If Harry chooses to go with Malfoy, his life will move down evil paths. However if Harry chooses to walk away from the "dark side" and make friends with some of the other - good - kids, his life will move in a very different direction. Fortunately, Harry choose wisely. That one choice shapes the entire trajectory of his life.

The choices we make about our friends, the people with whom we associate matter. They influence - to some extent - the type of people we become. An old Russian proverb says, *"Tell me who's your friend and I will tell you who you are."*

We know all about it with teenagers. Call it peer pressure or whatever. The same temptations existed back in ancient Israel. Younger people often left their homes and families to find jobs in cities like Jerusalem. And in urban areas they came in contact with all sorts of characters from different backgrounds and with different values. Some of these folks just delighted in acts of random violence (v.11-12), some lived as thieves (vs.13-14).

But those of us who are older face the same temptations. Although we may like to think we are immune to peer pressure, in fact we are just as influenced by the people we associate with as any teenager is. And so it is to all of us that the writers of Proverbs say, *"Take care of who your friends are."*

1. Some Friendships May Be Empty

The warnings in Proverbs 1:10-19 are both reasonable and realistic. There is some part of each of us that is attracted to the "dark side." Who of us can say that we have never felt a tug of attraction, a glint of envy when we have heard stories of wealthy criminals, flamboyant desperadoes or hard-living gangsters? Who of us has not occasionally cheered for the bad guy in a movie or a novel? There is enough rebellion in all of us to lure us to look sympathetically at doing wrong, especially if we know we won't get caught.

But Proverbs 24:1-2 warns, *"Don't envy evil people or desire their company. For their hearts plot violence, and their words always stir up trouble."* We can easily get caught in a downward spiral. We take one little step over the line of what we know is right. The first time it is a big deal. But the next time it is easier. And it becomes easier and easier. Before we are even aware, we find ourselves thinking about how we can push the limits a bit more. We find ourselves talking with other people who have done the same thing and they encourage us to try new things out.

Compromise becomes easier and easier.

Think of it - God created our hearts and minds primarily to worship God, to create prayers, to meditate upon Scripture, to plan acts of love, to create things of beauty, to find ways of helping people. God created our lips to share hope, to express love, to sing songs of adoration to God, to bless God, to whisper comfort, to give good advice, to croon lullabies. But how often we use our hearts and minds for anything but!

Paul writes, *"Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise ... Then the God of peace will be with you."* It is very hard to do that if we are always surrounded by people who are leading us everywhere BUT places where what is true, honorable, right, pure, and lovely is valued.

2. Some Friendships May Be Harmful

Few friendships, in fact are neutral. They either build us up, or bring us down. One classic example of this is a Proverbs that warns about friends with hot tempers: *"Don't befriend angry people or associate with hot-tempered people, or you will learn to be like them and endanger your soul"* (Proverbs 22:24-25). As one contemporary pundit has quipped, *"Low boiling points may speed up cooking, but they don't lead to good relationships!"*

The authors of Proverbs were afraid their students would learn the power of anger. Anger and hate are very powerful tools to control other people. Persons who have learned the power of anger use their fury as a bullwhip to keep others under their control.

- You see it in the angry parent who controls his or her child's behaviour completely with the threat of violence.
- You see it in the angry spouse who controls his partner through fear.
- You see it in the angry boss who believes that fear and hate are the best motivators for productivity.

If one's object is to control, anger, intimidation and fear work. But what are the consequences? Anger destroys the lives of those around them. There are those who are the victims of anger - emotionally scarred by the battering they receive. And there are those who learn the power of anger: the violence and abuse is passed on from person-to-person and generation-to-generation. Anger is contagious. More accurately, anger is a cancer. As we watch others throw their weight around and muscle their way ahead, something within us often wants to do the same. That is the trap within which we can find ourselves. Solomon's advice? *"Stay away!"*

The bigger issue here is that any sort of moral compromise may - in the short term - may lead to gain - but that is not the whole story. In the longer term, the consequence of compromise is always disaster. There is always fallout from sin:

- broken relationships
- pained consciences

- regret
- fear of betrayal or being caught

Those who compromise themselves, this passage warns, are ultimately the victims of their own crimes. In the end they will not find happiness, only disaster. Solomon's counsel? *"Don't befriend people who will lead you astray."* We all know who those people are ...

4. Some Friendships are Life-Giving

There is a moral to this passage. Very simply - friends influence us; and if they influence us to compromise, disaster will result. Evil deeds inevitably carry evil consequences. Not to know that is, in the phraseology of proverbs, to be a fool (1:7).

Good friends are a source of strength and comfort:

- *"A friend is always loyal, and a brother is born to help in time of need."*(17:17)
- *"There are 'friends' who destroy each other, but a real friend sticks closer than a brother."*(18:24)
- *"Never abandon a friend - either yours or your father's. When disaster strikes, you won't have to ask your brother for assistance. It's better to go to a neighbor than to a brother who lives far away."*(27:10)

Friends also help one another grow. Last week we considered Paul's words: *"Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves. Surely you know that Jesus Christ is among you ... Do the right thing..."*(2 Corinthians 13:5-7). *"What counts is whether we have been transformed into a new creation."*(Galatians 3:11-15). Friends can help us be people of God:

- *"Wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses from an enemy."*(27:6)
- *"The heartfelt counsel of a friend is as sweet as perfume and incense."*(27:9)
- *"As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend."*(27:17)

5. Friends: for Bad or For Good?

In 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 Paul writes about friendships from another perspective (read it).

In Corinth business people met regularly for meals in the temples to maintain the relationships through which business was conducted, and this involved elements of pagan worship and acceptance of pagan gods. The Corinthians failed to realize that being 'new creations' involves a complete change in allegiance and thought patterns. They couldn't keep on living as they had before. They had to live differently as followers of Jesus. They were not choosing their friends well - and falling into temptation. Paul is warning us about who we become intimate with, because some combinations are just not right...

The history of the Church shows Christians have tended to one of three approaches to life:

1. Some Christians have said that we should be completely separate from the world. Like a caterpillar retreating into its cocoon, we ought to live our own lives in isolation from "evil"

in the world. It is possible to be physically isolated from the world ... but spiritually and ethically wedded, at least in part, to the values of the age.

2. Some Christians have completely immersed themselves in the world to the point that in their ethics, values, morals and ways of living there is no distinction between themselves and anyone else (the Corinthians fit this category)
3. Other Christians have demonstrated that it is possible to be involved in society but show clear spiritual and ethical distinctiveness - to live, act, work, and do live in ways that honour the Lord and are consistent with His ethics.

Paul argues for #3. If we allow ourselves to become a Christian "tribe" or "ghetto" with no real influence in the world we miss God's heart of mission. God is on a mission to bring His Kingdom - His rule, His wisdom, His way - to all the earth. An essential - a core - part of our identity is to be His people, His ambassadors - living, being, and sharing His Kingdom. Our non-Christian friends need our witness and testimony about the love of God. People who do not yet know Jesus may come to know Him through us and our friendship! Friendships outside of "Christian circles" are essential to who we are as "missional" people - people who believe God wants to share His love with everyone. We need those friendships - they help us grow in our faith.

We need to be concerned. All people are made and loved by God. Their true selves are beautiful, and one of the challenges we have from God is to help them discover that inner beauty by introducing them to Jesus Christ.

We need to be careful. The ever-present danger is that we fail to heed his warning and accommodate to the values and life patterns of the age. It is a lot safer and easier to live in a Christian ghetto. But with every challenge there is also opportunity. To share our faith and grow the church of Jesus Christ, we need to be involved in the larger world. We need to be very self-aware in terms of what influence others are having upon us. We need strong Christian friends, too. Friends who can support us, encourage us - and keep us accountable.

We need to be faithful. I am not going to convert anyone or lead anyone to Jesus. The Holy spirit is going to do that. My calling is to be faithful. To live as a "new creation," in God's wisdom (see last week) - without compromise. And to share my faith in the places and with the people whom God brings my way. Some people will respond like porcupines - with lots of defenses. After all, all of us are prickly in our own ways. The people who seem most prickly are not beyond God's reach! God is in the business of changing lives, and we do what we can to contribute to the change. And God will work from there.

He did that in our lives. By faithful prayer, he will do that in their lives, too!

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