

Navigating Friendships with Emotional Wisdom (Proverbs 27)

Proverbs: The Wisdom of God as a Way of Life

Zionsville Fellowship | March 8, 2026 | Drew Hunter

J. C. Ryle was a pastor in England in the 1800s, and he wrote my favorite quote on friendship.

It's in his introduction to a sermon on Jesus as the best friend. But he began this by reflecting on the gift of friendship in general. I've shared part of this quote before. But I want to read the whole thing. Here was his introduction in that sermon.

"A friend is one of the greatest blessings on earth. Tell me not of money—love is better than gold; sympathy is better than lands. He is the poor man—who has no friends! This world is full of sorrow—because it is full of sin. It is a dark place. It is a lonely place. It is a disappointing place. The brightest sunbeam in it, is a friend. Friendship halves our troubles—and doubles our joys! A real friend is scarce and rare. There are many who will eat, and drink, and laugh with us in the sunshine of prosperity. There are few who will stand by us in the days of darkness—few who will love us when we are sick, helpless, and poor—few, above all, who will care for our souls!"ⁱ

This world is filled with sorrow and disappointment—and the greatest gift is friendship.

This is true—and many of you know this by your own experience. We seek to cultivate a culture of true friendship in our church—and many of you do this well. Others of you haven't experienced this, and you want to. Or maybe some of you have simply accepted that your life won't be filled with deep friendships.

Studies confirm that most people have fewer close relationships. Fewer people are getting married. Fewer people are staying married. Fewer people are living in community with others. Fewer people are engaged in a local church, and many who are engaged still don't enjoy life-on-life, soul-on-soul friendships.

We can all grow in making, keeping, and deepening friendships. We need a vision for what this can look like, and the wisdom to do it well.

That is what Proverbs 27 gives us.ⁱⁱ

We've seen that Proverbs is a curriculum in character development. It progresses from *beginning* to *elementary* to *intermediate* to *advanced* wisdom. Chapter 27 falls in advanced wisdom—so this is advanced wisdom for navigating relationships. **This chapter leads us to navigate friendship with emotional wisdom.**

We'll see three insights about navigating relationships well: We'll see how folly withers relationships, how wisdom grows them, and how Christ renews them.

1. Folly Withers Relationships (vv. 1–4, 7–8, 14–16)

First, folly withers relationships.

Folly is a way of describing ways of thinking and living that are out of step with wisdom. They are ways of thinking and living that are out of step with God’s design for life. We all have a measure of folly in our lives, and Proverbs is here to help us. Proverbs helps us identify foolishness—both in others, and also in our own selves.

This chapter identifies four ways folly withers relationships.

First, emotional explosiveness.

We may not see the connection between our emotions to friendship at first. But think about it. For those of you with siblings, what makes friendship hard with them? Or when has your marriage been at its worst? Or when have your friendships been most strained. ...Has it not often involved at least one person who could not control their negative emotions? Verses 3 and 4 show how forceful negative emotions ruin relationships. ³ A stone is heavy, and sand is weighty, but a fool’s provocation is heavier than both. ⁴ Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy?

When you’re in a relationship with someone who is foolish, what are they like when they don’t get their way? What are they like when something you do bothers them? Proverbs says their response is heavy—heavier than stones or a sand bag. It crushes your relationship under its weight. And then wrath and anger are unbearable, and jealousy is even worse. One commentary summarized these verses like this: “People with irrational and destruction emotional excitements are insufferable (v. 3) and incapable of friendship (v. 4). They should be avoided to create the spiritual milieu in which friendship flourishes.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We have normalized explosive negative emotions in our culture. We have de-emphasized the virtue of self-control. We often view big emotions as authentic, regardless of whether or not they are virtuous.

But these verses give us wisdom in two ways:

1. First, this teaches us to watch out for others. If you are close to someone who doesn’t control their emotions, it’s going to be unbearable. You will always be looking to manage them, always watching what you say, always tiptoeing around them.
2. Second, it teaches us to get our own negative emotions under control. If you are quick to get angry, if you lose your temper, if you always speak your mind—even when it’s hurtful—then you are probably not going to have healthy relationships. And maybe this explains why you haven’t. But the book of Proverbs says that wisdom can enter your heart—God invites you to receive the help of the Holy Spirit, and to humbly receive his wisdom.

Second, unfaithfulness.

Verses 7 and 8 take some thinking-through. When you read them in isolation, they don't really seem that profound. Nor do they seem to relate much to relationships. But these two verses go together—all through this chapter, verses are paired together like this. And we can only unlock the wisdom when we compare them together.

7 One who is full loathes honey, but to one who is hungry everything bitter is sweet.

8 Like a bird that strays from its nest is a man who strays from his home.

Verse 7 seems like it's just a very basic statement about our appetites. People who are full don't even want honey; and people who are starving will eat anything. What is this doing in the section on advanced wisdom? It's likely a metaphor for something else—but what?

When we read this with verse 8, it gives clarity to both verses and makes a profound point. Verse 8 is about a husband who strays from his home like a bird strays from his nest. This is a husband who abandons his family.

What do we get when we see these two verses placed together like this?

- We see that the one who is full is a man who is satisfied and content with his wife and family. He does not need other sweeter things like the honey of another woman. He will not stray from his home; he will not abandon his family.
- But the man who does abandon his family does so because he is hungry—he is not satisfied at home. He is seeking to be satisfied by someone else. He's controlled by his lust and hunger for more. And because of this, he will even eat things that are bitter in the end—he will pursue relationships that end up bitter and harmful.

We see this all the time. A husband or a wife who doesn't cultivate contentment with their spouse. So they go looking to be satisfied somewhere else, and it ends up bitter in the end—for everyone.

This is a call for married men (and women) to cultivate satisfied contentment at home. When someone abandons their family, it usually comes long after cultivating a hunger for something else.

Sometimes we hear people say we are all one decision away from ruining our lives like this. That's not true. Proverbs talks about foolishness like a path. When someone abandons their marriage, it usually comes after a long time of walking down that path. It's more true to say that we are all one decision away from stepping on the path that leads to this end. And each step on this path of unfaithfulness gains momentum to lead us further.

So this is a call to be satisfied your marriage. When you get married, you are committing to seeing your spouse in color, and others in grayscale. If you sense that your spouse is becoming grayscale to you, and others are vibrant, you are in a dangerous place. So, cultivate contentment and joy and satisfaction.

Third, insensitivity.

This is verse 14. It refers to someone who is being emotionally insensitive. Or, we could say—someone who is being annoying.

14 Whoever blesses his neighbor with a loud voice,
rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing.

It's early in the morning. You're still tired. And someone gives you a nice, strong slap on the back, and says, "how ya doin'!" They don't know how to read the moment, they don't know how to read emotions. And so they do things like this that are annoying.

There may even be a note of hypocrisy here. They are pronouncing a blessing, and they may do it loudly so others can hear. They are doing it so they can come across super-spiritual.^{iv}

Proverbs elsewhere talks about those who sing joyful songs to a heavy heart. They are over-the-top happy when you are sad. They can't read emotions and adjust to what people need. And the result is that they are annoying and you don't want to spend time with them. It withers friendship.

This is about wise sensitivity. It's about emotional intelligence. It's the ability to express sympathy to others. These are important for friendship.

A fourth behavior that withers relationships is contentiousness.

Verses 15–16 refer to a contentious or quarrelsome wife. She shows up five times in Proverbs, actually.^v That itself says something. Proverbs is warning young men to choose their wives carefully—and to watch out for someone who is quarrelsome. It gives us plenty of poetic images to drive the point home.

15 A continual dripping on a rainy day and a quarrelsome wife are alike;
16 to restrain her is to restrain the wind or to grasp oil in one's right hand.

Contentiousness and argumentativeness ruins relationships—and it will wither a marriage. For those who plan to be married one day, you want a spouse who won't drive you crazy. You want a spouse who is mature, and is growing in character and wisdom. A marriage is to be the best of friendships.

And this point about contentiousness applies to other relationships as well. Maybe you don't have close friends because you're like this. You are always bothered about stuff. You're easily offended. Or you gossip and complain a lot. Or you are overly negative or disagreeable. If you're like this, you will repel the best kinds of friends. You will either not have people close to you, or you will only attract other contentious people.

All four of these are different forms of folly because they ruin relationships.

This is folly because in Proverbs folly is about not recognizing how life actually works. It doesn't respect and align to reality as God made it. God designed relationships to work, and we need wisdom to navigate them.

Many of our relationships wither because of these—because of emotional explosiveness, unfaithfulness, insensitivity, and contentiousness.

So, use these four marks to identify why your relationships may have withered. Maybe people you've tried to befriend are like one of these. Or maybe one of these characteristics is too much a part of your own life—and it's why people don't really spend time with you.

2. Wisdom Grows Relationships (vv. 5–6, 9–10)

Now, second, wisdom grows relationships.

This chapter also draws attention to three positive ways we can grow our friendships—through caring correction, encouraging counsel, and resilient constancy.

First, caring correction.

Relationships are going to have challenges. Friends are going to make foolish choices. And in these moments, real friendship proves itself by being willing to offer loving correction.

This is verses 5 and 6—and each verse helps us understand the other.

5 Better is open rebuke than hidden love.

6 Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

Open rebuke is telling someone they have a problem. It's offering a word of constructive feedback. Notice that "open" is contrasted with "hidden love." That means when you tell your friend they have a problem, this is an act of love. The opposite would be not telling them, but that would be hiding your love. If you care about someone, you should care about them enough to help them grow. And you should correct them in love.

If you never offer a word of correction when your friend or spouse needs it, that's selfish. You care more about what they think of you than you care about what's best for them.

Then verse 6 makes more sense in light of this: the “faithful wounds” are acts of caring correction. It may hurt—receiving corrective feedback doesn’t feel good. But it is faithful, because they are your friend. They offer it in love. They are not a jerk about it.

Of course, this does not mean all criticism is an act of love. Some people love to criticize and they never encourage. And they don’t do it in a sincere, loving way. But if you are a true friend, you will do this with wisdom.

For example, here is what wise and humble correction looks like. Here are four aspects to this kind of caring correction.

1. You do this in the context of friendship. These are the “faithful wounds of a friend,” not of a stranger. We do not get to go correcting everyone who has a problem; we do this in the context of a trusting relationship.
2. You do this with humility. You say that maybe you have misunderstood the situation. You are open to correction yourself about the matter. As Jesus said to do, take the log out of your own eye before removing the speck in yours.
3. You do this only when it’s necessary. You don’t bring up every little problem—because Proverbs also says it’s your glory to overlook an offense.
4. You do this gently. Galatians 6:1 says, “if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.”

In light of this, here are four questions to ask when you’re thinking about offering this caring correction. 1) Is this your friend and do you have their trust? 2) Are you doing this with humility? 3) Is this necessary, or can you overlook it? 4) Are you doing this gently?

Second, we grow relationships through encouraging counsel.

One of the greatest gifts of friendship is the kind of counsel that only a friend can give. This is verse 9: “Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel.”

The phrase “earnest counsel” can be literally translated, “counsel of soul.” This is counsel from the heart. It is the kind of counsel that a professional cannot give; only a friend who knows you well can give this.

Do you have friends like this? And do you provide this for your friends? This is what happens when your relationship is forged over many years. And you look to each other for advice. You call for advice. You get together and ask for advice. And when your friend asks you for advice, you give it. This is in a friendship, in a small group, in a marriage.

I believe pastoral and professional counseling matters. But I’ve also heard a number of times that counselors say much of what they’re doing is offering friendship. They listen. They have conversation. They give advice. I’ve heard counselors say that many of their clients wouldn’t need them if they had good and wise friends.

This is one reason why we want a culture of friendship in the church. Because we all need to grow in wisdom—we all need advice—and the best way to get this is from wise friends.

Third, we grow relationships through resilient constancy.

I remember when I first noticed the theme of friendship in Proverbs fifteen years ago. One of the things that struck me was how direct and clear it spoke about friendship. And one of the lines that stood out most was verse 10—and how it gives a direct command about friendship. It is about loyalty to your friends in the midst of suffering: “Do not forsake your friend and your father’s friend, and do not go to your brother’s house in the day of your calamity. Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away.”

The first line emphasizes being there for a friend when they suffer—don’t forsake them. And the second line emphasizes relying on your friend when *you* suffer—don’t go to your brother’s house who is far—go to your neighbor’s house who is near. A friend nearby is better than a sibling far away.

Now, if you are going to let your friends rely on you in their suffering—and if you are going to rely on them during your suffering—what does that assume? It assumes you talk about your suffering. It assumes you know what each other is going through. It assumes you are open and honest and talk about this. It assumes you are not just talking about the superficialities of life.

I recently saw a funny, sad-but-true video making fun of male friendships. The guys were playing a game together, as they apparently always do. And one of them asked the others what was going on in their lives—like actually going on. And the friends didn’t really know how to respond. And the one who asked said, “guys, my wife asks me what’s going on with you after we hang out, and I never have anything to say. Just tell me something, anything.” And then after a while, we find out that one guy got fired a year ago and has no money. The other guy has some other kind of disaster in his life. But they never knew that because they never talked about it.

We can laugh about it because it’s true. But it really shouldn’t be. True friendship is life-on-life and soul-on-soul.

And notice the intergenerational friendship here. Verse 10 says, “Do not forsake your friend and your father’s friend.” This assumes you know your parents’ friends, too. And over time, when they need your help, you’re there for them also.

This means, moms and dads, that you should have friends, and your kids should know them. I’ve seen many people stop spending time with friends once they get married and have kids. They get too busy with work and home life, and they over-do the sports thing with their kids. And then the kids grow up without seeing friendship modeled in their

parents. The parents think they are devoting their whole lives to their kids—but they're actually hindering their kid's development. Your kids need to see that you are a true and full human—with a full range of deep relationships. And they can grow in their bond of friendship with your friends as they grow older, too.

And this is actually what your kids need to grow in their faith as well. I've seen studies that identify key factors in children who keep the faith when they leave home. Over and over—it says that the kids who stay Christians are those who have two or three Christian adults in their lives who are not their parents.

So, young men and women, I encourage you to befriend older Christians here.

And parents, enjoy friendship and share your friends with your kids.

And older Christians, invest in friendship with younger men and women in the church.

These are three ways we can build relationships—through caring correction, encouraging counsel, and resilient constancy.

3. Christ Renews Relationships

We've seen how folly withers relationships, and how wisdom grows them. Now, finally, how Christ renews them.

Proverbs gives us the wisdom of God embodied in human life.

If you were to perfectly follow the wisdom of Proverbs, you would be a perfect person.

You would have deep and rich relationships.

You would not damage them with emotional explosiveness.

You would not destroy them through unfaithfulness.

You wouldn't run people away through annoying insensitivity.

And you would not frustrate people through being contentious.

And positively, you would wisely offer caring correction out of love for your friends.

You would give them encouraging counsel to help them make wise choices.

And you would be there through thick and thin with resilient constancy.

You would not forsake your friends.

In other words, you would be like Jesus.

Is this chapter not ultimately giving us a portrait of Jesus? He is the opposite of all that is bad in this chapter. And he is the best of all that is good. He is the truest and greatest friend. He is perfect friendship embodied.

And do you know—or remember—what Jesus said to his disciples the night before he died?

He explained the entirety of the Christian life in terms of friendship. He summarized his commands as loving one another as friends. He said the cross was a cosmic act of friendship. He said our relationship with him is defined in terms of friendship. And he offers this friendship to each one of us.

Listen to John 15:12–15. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”

Let me summarize it like this:

How should you treat one another as Christians? You should love one another as friends.

How should you understand the cross? As an act of friendship for you.

How should you understand your relationship with Jesus? As a friendship.

Jesus not only calls us to enjoy friendship in the church, but he models it for us. And he doesn't just model it for us, he dies for us in order to transform us to fulfill this.

Jesus died for all our folly and sin in our failure to cultivate friendship. He withered on the cross to forgive us for all the ways we wither our relationships. And he rose again and gives us the Spirit so we can be empowered to grow our relationships.

And now he brings us together in the local church—and he invites us to live out the relational vision of Proverbs together.

Implications

So, as we wrap up, here are three final implications.

1. First, identify at least one way you have contributed to the withering of friendships. Is there one withering behavior that you do, or have done? Or when you consider the behaviors that grow relationships, have you failed in that?

Identify this area for growth, and confess that to God—receive his forgiveness through Jesus. And if you have damaged a relationship through this, let that friend know that you're sorry. And ask God to help you, by his Spirit, to grow in this area.

2. Second, reach out to someone this week and honor them for the way they model friendship. This chapter has lots of examples. Verse 2 says, to let another praise you and not your own mouth. That assumes that we don't praise ourselves, but that it is fitting to praise others. We ultimately praise God; but we also express honor to one another. Identify a friend or spouse or family member, and one characteristic of friendship they model—and thank them for it.

3. Finally, receive and enjoy Jesus's friendship.

He is the truest friend. He is not just our king and savior; he is our friend. And he saves us so that we would enjoy his friendship. Get to know him through reading his word. Talk to him through prayer. Receive his transforming power so that you can become a friend like him.

Maybe you have never come to know Christ as the truest friend. You can repent of your sin and folly and receive his forgiveness and friendship today. Or maybe you have been a Christian for many years, but you don't view Jesus as your truest friend. You don't relate to him in terms of friendship. Honor him by acknowledging his friendship.

J. C. Ryle commended friendship as the relationship that halves our troubles and doubles our joys. But he also recognized that true friendship is rare, and we often fail each other. And so I'll end with these words from him:

"Does any[one] want a real friend? I write to recommend one to your notice this day. I know of One "who sticks closer than a brother!" (Proverbs 18:24) I know of One who is ready to be your friend *for time and for eternity*, if you will receive Him...

The friend I want you to know is *Jesus Christ*. Happy is that family in which Christ has the foremost place! Happy is that person whose chief friend is Christ!"^{vi}

ⁱ From the introduction of J. C. Ryle, "The Best Friend," sermon, https://gracegems.org/Ryle/best_friend.htm.

ⁱⁱ There are two chapters in Proverbs that talk about friendship more than any other place in the Bible. One is Proverbs 17, and one is our text this morning, which is Proverbs 27.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bruce Waltke and Ivan De Silva, *Proverbs: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 380.

^{iv} Waltke and De Silva say they are giving a hypocritical blessing. The result is that God will reckon it to them as a cursing because he sees through it (Waltke and De Silva, *Proverbs*, 384).

^v Proverbs 19:13; 21:9, 19; 25:24; 27:15–16.

^{vi} J. C. Ryle, "The Best Friend."