

REMEDY FOR THE DULL TOOL

7th in a Series on Proverbs titled, "Mastering Life"

Passage: Proverbs 17:17 - Topic: Friendship

A few years ago I read a book that I enjoyed, but when I later heard that someone planned to make a movie from it I was sure it was a bad idea. It seemed to me that Hollywood would either have to totally distort the story, or tell it straight and make a very slow and boring movie. The book was *The Martian*, by Andy Weir. The problem is that it tells a story of an astronaut who becomes stranded on Mars and has to find a way to survive all alone in a hostile environment cut off from all human contact. The problem is, it had some similarity to the Tom Hanks movie, *Castaway*, which was about a man stranded all alone on a Pacific island, cut off from all human contact. To me this was not a good thing because I found that movie to be slow and boring. It was just hard to get excited about a guy having conversations with a volleyball. As a rule all pieces of sports equipment are uninspiring conversationalists.

To my surprise they did make a movie that stayed pretty true to the story, yet found a way to be interesting and engaging. There is a crucial turning point in the story. The central character, named Mark Watney, manages to stabilize his situation and make a plan for survival for some time, but he has no way of contacting earth to establish a rescue plan. He comes up with a brilliant idea. He uses a rover vehicle that was part of his mission to travel to the location of the Pathfinder probe, which had died in 1997. He salvages its camera and communication equipment and uses it to establish a rudimentary link back to earth. It was initially cumbersome and painstakingly slow, but he was in contact. He was no longer alone, and that changed everything. He knew that all alone he would not be able to survive long term. But with others helping him, he had a chance. That is an important message. It is consistent with what Proverbs tells us is essential for mastering life. We will get a glimpse of how we can do that as we consider the implications of Proverbs 17:17 today.

GOD WANTS FRIENDSHIPS TO BE A PRIORITY

Proverbs 17:17 says, "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity." What I notice there is a friend loves *at all times*. No matter what may be happening in life, a friend should always be there. A friend continues to be a friend. There are a few things that God tells us to do always. We are to give thanks always. We are to praise him always. We are to trust him always. We are to love always. And we are to be a friend at all times. That suggests to me that being a friend is a big deal as God sees it. In other words, God wants us to invest heavily in relationships.

This is a consistent message in the Bible. It starts early in the story of the Scriptures. In Genesis 1 we see God creating the stars, the sun, the moon, the earth, the seas, the plants and animals, and finally humans. At each step it says God saw that all he had made was good. But in Genesis 2, after creating the prototype human, God said for the first time that there was something that was not good. It was that Human Version 1.0 was alone. That wasn't a mistake by God. He didn't create him, wind him up and let him go and then say, "Huh. I didn't think about this, but that unit isn't ever going to function ideally that way. Time for Version 2.0." God put the first guy in that situation so that the man would understand that it was not good for him to be alone. God knew it all along, he just wanted humans to know it too.

It's interesting that God made this point that it wasn't good for Version 1 to be alone. Adam had an ideal environment, including an unhindered, direct relationship with God himself. That is the source of all life, but still God said, "he needs something else." That says to me that God created that prototype with a hardwired need for human companionship. At that point Adam would have had no concept of human relationship. He was the only human! God put him in a situation where he likely sensed that something was missing, but he would have had no concept of what was lacking. He'd never experienced another human being so he had no concept that it was even possible or what it might be like. I suspect when God said, "It's not good that you're alone," he would have said, "Uh, what does alone mean?" All he had known was alone, and he had no idea of what not alone would be like.

The crucial message of that exercise is that God was teaching Adam that he needed companionship. He was not the Lone Ranger. God has created us in a way that there is a part of us nothing beside human relationship can fix. We strive for success or money or respect with all our might, but if we get all of those things and are alone, we will still be alone, and it won't be good. We will feel the pain of that emptiness.

We should note that God didn't say about Version 1.0, "Hmm, he's not successful enough, and that's not good." It is possible to be without all the trappings of success, money and respect in the world, and still be fine because we are rich in relationships. Much of history people lived in small villages struggling to just survive, so success, fame, even money were not factors. Yet they were rich in relationships and were satisfied.

As we look at the broad sweep of Scripture we see this is a consistent message. In John 13:34-35 Jesus said the way that people will know that we are his disciples is that we love one another. It's not that we are impressive, talented, powerful, rich or better than other people. The defining mark of a follower of Jesus is Love. It is about relationships. In

Romans 12:5, Paul wrote that, “in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”

God has constituted his church, his functioning representative group on earth, so that it is a body made of many members that belong to each other. Notice that he said we belong to each other. We don’t have the right to decide that we are free agents who operate on our own. We have a responsibility to other members of God’s people to belong to them.

We should think about the implications for us as members of a body. Consider your own physical body. Our son has chosen to be a doctor in emergency medicine. We are, of course, crazy proud of him, but I have to tell you I’ve always wondered why he would want to do such a thing. The emergency department is a place I wish to avoid with great fervor. If you go to the emergency department, you are not having a good day. I knew he was going to deal with difficult stuff, but I had little idea how hard it would be at times. He deals every week with life and death issues, and they don’t always have a good outcome. Boy does he have some stories to tell. Among them are several stories of treating people with severed body parts. One of them was so appalling...well, never mind. The point I want to get at here is this: how well do you think those severed body parts do once they are cut off, all on their own in the world? How well do they function as free agents?

Obviously they don’t function at all. They die in short order. And that is exactly what happens to us when we are cut off from one another in the body of Christ. God has made us so that we need each other. When you are not tied in with other believers, fellowshiping with them, worshipping with them, serving with them, loving them, you are at best impoverishing yourself, and at worst, killing your own soul. God has made us so that we need each other. We are created to live in relationship with one another.

It is obviously important to make friendships a priority because God has told us to do so and surely we want to obey him. But why has God made it so important? One aspect of that is because of how important friendships are for us to become fully human and master life.

FRIENDSHIPS ARE KEY TO OPTIMIZING OURSELVES

Proverbs 27:17 says, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” We had a really nice rib roast for our Christmas dinner. It was my job to carve the roast. I was working at it diligently when Michael’s mom Susan said, “Is that knife sharp enough?” I didn’t know. It was working, though I had to admit it did seem to require considerable effort from the carver. Laurie took the knife from me and ran it through a tool she had, a knife sharpener. The metal of the blade was worked against a hard surface in the tool and

honed to a finer point. After that the carving was quicker and easier. The knife became much more effective at its job, much more useful by being sharpened.

Do you get what this verse is saying? Without other people you don't have anyone sharpening you. In other words, **you're going to be a dull tool**. Go back to Paul's analogy that the church is the body of Christ. He uses that same analogy in 1 Corinthians 12 where he makes the point that we all have different gifts, and we need all those gifts to function well. If you disassemble a human body into its various lone parts, how well does it function? Obviously it doesn't, it dies. The whole with the parts working together is incomparably greater than the sum of the individual parts. The synergy that is created by the parts cooperating, supporting, sharpening each other is phenomenal.

Remove even one part and the whole is diminished. A couple of years ago I had surgery to repair a badly torn tendon in my right arm. The first couple of days afterward my arm was in a sling and it was pretty much useless. Do you know how much less efficient life is when that happens? Have you ever tried getting dressed using just one arm? Have you tried tying your shoes using only one hand? I have one word for you: sandals. Have you tried brushing your teeth with your left hand because your dominant right hand is out of commission? I survived, of course, but I can assure you of this: I had to not be in a hurry because progress was glacially slow at times. And it was quite humbling. There is nothing quite like having to say to your wife, "Hey, honey, could you tie my shoes for me?"

Not so long ago Laurie and I were out for dinner and at one point Laurie said to me quietly, "Hey, Rick, you've got something stuck between your teeth." Do you know how that is when you are with someone and they have something stuck in their teeth? You look at them and your eyes go right to that piece of broccoli or whatever it is. It doesn't destroy your life, but you wish they could resolve it. The problem is, I usually don't know when I've got something stuck in my teeth. If I knew I'd be anxious to get rid of it. I may luck out and happen to see myself in a mirror and realize there's a problem. But if not, I need someone to help me out and tell me about it. I need iron to sharpen iron.

My concern here is not with what might be in my teeth, but with the fact that there are a lot of other things about me that I cannot see. We all have blind spots. We are not good at being aware of our own foibles or of how we might be insensitive to another person. We can learn from others how to be much better at some things we do, but only if they are there to teach us and sharpen us.

Marriage is one place where we can see how much better we are as a team than we would be as individuals. When it comes to some things like handling our finances, while I am not great at it, I'm better than Laurie and my little ability helps us function. And when there's a

need for knowledge of trivia, I'm better than Laurie. On the other hand, when it comes to putting together a "some assembly required" item, it pains me to admit it, but Laurie is miles ahead of me. If a toilet is not functioning properly she can diagnose it and usually fix it, while I stand in mute helplessness. I end up being like the OR nurse in a surgery. Only instead of "scalpel... hemostat" it's "Philips screwdriver... wrench." I just stand there and hand her the instruments. When it came to raising our children, Laurie was a brilliant mom who somehow knew stuff that amazed me, stuff I had no idea about. She is practically a genius when it comes to people and relationships, and that is an enormous help to me. I'm still trying to figure out what I'm a genius at that is a big help to her.

The point here is that we all understand that we are much stronger, wise, more effective, more efficient when teamed with others than we are when we are all alone. It even turns out that we are healthier. Dr. Vivek Murthy, who was the US Surgeon General from 2014 to 2017, has written that having weak social connections or being isolated is as bad for us as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. He said it reduces task performance and increases the risk of dementia and depression dramatically. Other studies have concluded that weak social connection is worse for our health than being obese. So you are much better off being obese than being alone! There is even a link between being alone and poverty.

Jameson Wetmore is a researcher at Arizona State University's School for the future of Innovation in Society. He has studied and commented recently on the Amish community. They have resisted innovations such as the automobile and television, yet welcome modern medicine. He studied their perspective on technology and here is what he said. "The reason the Amish rejected television is because it is a one way conduit to bring another society into their living rooms. They want to maintain the society as they have created it. And the automobile as well. As soon as you have a car your ability to leave your local community becomes significantly easier. You no longer have to rely on your neighbor for eggs when you run out." He asked one Amish person why they don't use cars and the response was, "Look what they did to your society." Wetmore said, "What do you mean?" The reply was, "Well, do you know your neighbor? Do you know the names of your neighbors?" Clearly the Amish have made community and relationships their priority. Perhaps we should learn from them.

FRIENDSHIPS ARE CRUCIAL IN HARD TIMES

Remember that verse we started with. A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity. It is in times of adversity that we most need friends, people there to help us through. Proverbs 18:24 says, "One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."

Have you ever had unreliable friends, people who seemed to be your friends and were right there with you when the days were sunny and all was right in the world, but when the hard times came they disappeared? Have there been people in your life that you learned the hard way that when you needed them the most you can't count on them?

That is a deeply painful experience. At the time you most need help, they not only don't come through for you, they actually add to the hardship by making you feel more alone than ever. There was a man who I considered a friend, someone Laurie and I had ministered to during some hard times in his life, who in the two most difficult times of life to date for us, essentially told me I was not cut out for ministry. I couldn't help but think, "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity, and buddy, you are neither a friend nor a brother. When I faced adversity you were right there at my back, sticking a knife in it. Twice, no less."

This year will mark 40 years of ministry as a pastor for Laurie and me. Twice in the past couple of months Laurie has had conversations with people that she has encountered who have said to her, "I don't know how you guys have survived for so long." Well there are a couple of reasons. First, and most important, God has been with us, strengthening us every step of the way. But second, we haven't done it alone. For me, Laurie has been a tower of strength. No matter what we have gone through she has been there, always believing in me, always affirming me, always encouraging me. I can assure you with absolute certainty that had it not been for her my attempts at pastoral ministry would have ended 35 years ago. So you can blame her.

We've had family who have stood with us and believed in us. I've had a brother who has been a brother born for adversity, and that's been a huge help. And we have had friends who cared for us, loved us, believed in us and stood with us when the bullets were flying. Just a couple of days ago a friend told me, "we are with you and Laurie wherever you go." That is so humbling, but so encouraging and so hope giving. You all are here because you have been that kind of friends. All I can tell you is, we are eternally grateful for you, because during a time of great adversity and beyond you have been the friends we needed.

We are all going to face times when life is hard and dark. If we try to go through it alone it just becomes even harder and darker. It makes it seem hopeless. One of the things Laurie and I learned when we went through the worst grief we have ever experienced is that people are intimidated by true grief. They don't know what to say and they don't know what to do. What we found was there was nothing they could say that would make the pain go away even a little. There's no point in worrying about trying to come up with something to say because nothing you can say will stop the pain. But there was something they did that was important. By their presence, by their compassion, by their words they said to us,

“You matter to us. Your pain matters, and we are hurting with you. We would do anything for you.” When you go through the worst times, you need those kinds of friends. But the only way to have them is to invest in building those friendships now.

APPLICATION

Hopefully you are now convinced that God wants you to invest in relationships and you need to build friendships. So what should we do in response?

MAKE RELATIONSHIPS A PRIORITY

We are swimming against the tide when it comes to investing in people. This is true for two reasons. First is that, as you will see, building relationships is costly. There is no shortcut. It involves energy and time. It involves love and grace, for people are inconvenient and often pre-occupied with themselves. They can often be disappointing and even annoying. So building lasting, strong bonds will have to be done with liberal applications of grace and a lot of time and energy. The problem with this is that we humans are inherently selfish. We are the stars of our own shows and the others in the show are only supporting actors. In other words, if we just operate naturally we will tend to live as mavericks, all on our own, pursuing our agenda. People will get in the way of that agenda, so we will have to operate in an unnatural, spiritual way. We will have to deliberately choose to obey God and say no to self.

A second factor that exacerbates this problem is that our particular culture worships at the altar of individualism. This individualistic streak has some positive effects on freedom and creativity. But it is highly susceptible to morphing into an addiction to self. In his book, *Locking Arms*, Stu Weber wrote that in America today, “the loftiest value is SELF. Self-orientation. Self-improvement. Self-preservation. Self-assertion. Self, self, self. Our culture’s highest value seems to be ‘being true to self.’ That is the Credo of the Cult of the Individual, the most destructive and insidious false religion in this country.”

Our culture is utterly dedicated to and steeped in the premise that what is by far most important is becoming more successful, building financial wealth, achieving your personal agenda. That comes before relationships. It doesn’t much understand it when people choose people and relationships over those other pursuits.

We will have to choose, discipline ourselves to reject both our culture’s siren call and our own native bent toward self. We will have to make the priority to spend the time and energy caring about others. A couple of years ago I decided to help out in our worship team I should try to learn to play bass guitar. I wasn’t sure I would be able to do it, but I set out to try. I got the basics, but I wasn’t very good. The first Sunday morning I played in the

band was a near train wreck. I was nervous, stressed, fumbling. I managed to get through it, but it was not easy. Everything seemed to happen so fast, and I found myself having a hard time keeping up. I got lost several times and made a lot of mistakes. Recently I reflected after playing the bass again on Sunday. I've improved. I'm still not very good, probably never will be. But I can survive. And I noticed that playing is not anywhere close to as stressful as it was. Everything has slowed down, a lot. I usually know what's going on and I don't make nearly as many mistakes. It's actually fun. Do you know what the difference is? Mostly it has been time. I've put in a lot more time playing the bass.

Guess what makes the difference in building friendships. Time and energy. Dr. Jeffrey Hall, a professor at the University of Kansas, has done considerable study on friendships and what it takes to build them. He says generally it takes 40 to 60 hours spent together to build a casual friendship. To become true friends requires between 80 to 100 hours. To move from that level to best friend requires 160 to 200 hours. In other words, we just have to put in the time to care about people and be with them. That means making time for them. Taking the time to call and see how they are doing. Sending them a note, shooting them an email, being in touch, listening.

Yes, it requires time and effort, but remember this. You and I were created for relationship. It is hardwired into us by God, and there is no substitute for it. Even more important, the only way we can bring God's grace and love into the lives of others is by being in relationship with them.

FOCUS ON BEING, NOT HAVING

When we think about friendships almost all of us feel, "Yes, I need friends. I wish I had friends like the Bible talks about. I wish people would be that friend at all time, a brother born for adversity to me. Frankly, I feel lonely and don't feel like I have real friends."

A few years ago Marla Paul, a columnist at the *Chicago Tribune* confessed in a column, "I am lonely. This loneliness saddens me. How did it happen I could be 42 years old and not have enough friends?" She described how she read *The Ugly Duckling* to her daughter and felt immediate kinship to the bird that wandered from place to place looking for creatures with whom he belongs. The column struck a nerve. People stopped her on the street, at work, in stores to tell her they felt exactly the same way. She got a flood of letters from people ranging from CEO's to homemakers all sharing their loneliness.

The problem for us is that recognizing the need for deep relationships and for friends easily becomes a source of self-pity because no one is the friend I want, and resentment of others who we think should be better friends to us. There's a truth you must grasp. No one will

ever be enough. We are all black holes of need, and we can suck everything another person has to give out of them, and it still won't be enough.

Self-pity and resentment are death. You will never experience life by turning inward and feeling sorry for yourself. And to add to the fun those two elements are like a repellant to other people. If you were to go to a tropical island and go for a hike in the jungle I would strenuously encourage you to put on some mosquito repellant or you'll be eaten alive. Hopefully that chemical will ward off the insects. I can tell you this, feeling self-pity, wallowing in your own need, resenting others because they don't meet your expectations is more effective at warding off potential friends than any mosquito repellant ever could be.

Toby and Anna's dog, Doc, is the neediest canine I have ever encountered. He is absolutely desperate for attention every minute of the day. I like dogs that are people oriented, but Doc is in a totally different quantum orbit. His need is vast and endless. Do you know what that causes? He is trying and exhausting to be around. Anna, who is a true dog lover, has summed it up, "Doc is the worst dog in the world." When we are obsessed with ourselves and our need we should not be surprised if we have that same effect on people.

There's an important reminder. You and I are created by God to love. That's what we are here to do. We will never find real joy and fulfillment until we are loving and not obsessed with self. That means that your focus needs to be on being the friend to others that you wish you had. Stop thinking about what you want and need, and look for ways to be that friend that is closer than a brother to other people.

RELY ON THE ULTIMATE FRIEND

By the ultimate friend, as you already have guessed, I mean God. No one has greater love than this, that he lay down his life for his friend. Jesus has done that. He is the friend you need. In John 15:15 Jesus told his disciples that he no longer called them servants, but he called them friends. He does the same with us. Can you imagine this? Jesus wants you to be his friend! In this case there is a person who hasn't been a very good friend. That person is not Jesus, it's you and me. We are not the friend to Jesus that we would like other people to be to us, but he was and continues to be the best friend we will ever have. No one ever has cared about us or ever will care about us to the degree that he does.

We all have need for friendship. The place to start is drawing on the life-giving friendship of Jesus. He will never leave you, nor will he forsake you. Sometimes we sing the old song, "What a friend we have in Jesus." Oh what needless pain we bear all because we do not carry everything to him in prayer.

Do you believe Jesus is really your friend? Do you think he likes you, and wants to be with you? He came into this world and he died on a cross so that he could have you as his friend forever. There is nothing he would not do for you, and he will never, ever abandon you, not even for a second. Furthermore, he is continually working to bless you and give you what you need. That means that today, at this moment, he is seeing to it that you have the people in your life that you need. So rather than feeling sorry for yourself about why people aren't better friends, start thanking God for the people he has brought into your life. Give thanks to your friend, Jesus, for putting them there. He says they are enough for you today, so thank him, and do your best to bless them by being their friend.

Stu Weber is a pastor and author. When he graduated from college in 1967 he joined the army. He applied for and was accepted into Ranger school at Fort Benning, Georgia. He was a brand new 2nd Lieutenant, one of 288 officers in his Ranger class. They knew they were all headed for Vietnam where the life expectancy of new 2nd lieutenants was frighteningly short. A grizzled Ranger noncommissioned officer introduced himself as their trainer. He said, "We are here to save your lives." He went on, "First we are going to see to it that you overcome your natural fears...And second we are going to show you just how much incredible stress the human mind and body can endure. Many of you will not complete the 9 weeks...But for those who do...you will be the US Army's best. America's best. You will be confident. You will survive, even in combat. And you will accomplish your mission." Only about 90 out of that group did complete the training, less than a third. But the trainer did something interesting as the first step in their training. He assigned each of them a Ranger buddy. He said, "The two of you will stick together. You will never leave each other...You will help each other. You will encourage each other...If necessary you will carry each other." Weber says the Army was saying, "Never go into battle alone. Never, ever walk alone. Stay together, Rangers. Live together, and if necessary, die together."

The Army is recognizing what Jesus said a long time ago. We are in a war, and to survive, we need to stand together. Let's make it a priority to be the buddies that others need, to be the friend to others God has called us to be.